

Post-pandemic student engagement: Towards techno-humanistic reflexivity

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Abstract

This opinion piece examines how student engagement is understood and practised in contemporary higher education, where technological innovation and humanistic values increasingly intersect (see Bond et al., 2020). It approaches the concept through a techno-humanistic lens, arguing that recent conceptualisations of engagement, grounded in socio-cultural perspectives, draw on humanistic principles, such as self-actualisation, creativity, and personal growth, realised through relational interactions and collaborative learning. In contemporary educational environments, these principles are enacted and mediated through digital technologies, enabling students to engage both collaboratively and independently. Noddings (2013) illustrates how human-centred principles of care and responsibility can guide educational relationships, providing an ethical framework that can be extended to digitally mediated learning. This framework resonates with UNESCO's (2021, 2022) framing of education as a public good, linking individual development to broader social responsibility. Viewed through this techno-humanistic lens, engagement can be understood as a reflexive, contextually mediated practice in which human agency and technological mediation interact to shape meaningful learning that supports individual development while fostering broader social responsibility. This perspective highlights that prevailing understandings remain incomplete without recognising the intertwined humanistic, technological, and ethical conditions shaping post-pandemic student engagement.

Background

Student engagement has been conceptualised in multiple ways over the past two decades, reflecting its centrality to learning, personal development, and institutional effectiveness. Early models often conceived engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (e.g., Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). In such models, engagement is understood as the extent to which students are “on task”, motivated, and psychologically committed to learning. This framing focuses primarily on outward behaviours and internal states, with limited attention to the socio-cultural contexts that shape students' participation.

Subsequent socio-cultural approaches reframed engagement as a dynamic and contextually situated process influenced by such humanistic dimensions as learners' identities, relationships, and sense of belonging (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Within this shift, Bryson (2014, 2016) advanced a relational understanding of engagement, emphasising that it is co-constructed through dialogue, trust, and shared purpose between students and educators. This view resonates with the “students-as-partners” movement (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Cook-Sather et al., 2014),

which translates these relational principles into practice by positioning learners as collaborators in curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional change. Rather than separate developments, both perspectives reflect a broader pedagogical turn towards shared agency, mutual respect, and the co-creation of meaningful learning experiences (see also Felten & Lambert, 2020). Expanding on these ideas, Reeve et al.'s (2020) framework of "agentic engagement" incorporates a proactive dimension: students intentionally contribute to teaching and learning through initiative, self-direction, and active participation, shaping their environments and co-constructing knowledge in ways that reflect both personal motivation and social participation.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the established foundations of engagement in higher education, propelling teaching and learning into digital environments that quickly became central to how students connected, participated, and experienced belonging. Engagement was no longer confined to face-to-face interaction but distributed across virtual platforms and interfaces in which human and non-human actors (educators, learners, artificial intelligence tools, and learning management systems) co-shaped recognition, responsiveness, and participation. Out of this disruption emerged a lasting hybrid ecosystem where humanistic goals and technological systems coexist and continually interact (Rapanta et al., 2021). Hybridisation has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education, blending synchronous and asynchronous modes, physical and virtual presence, and human and algorithmic feedback in everyday pedagogy (Gulliksen et al., 2023). In this recalibrated landscape, technology functions not only as a tool but as a pedagogical partner that mediates relationships, structures participation, and introduces new opportunities as well as constraints (Rapanta et al., 2021; Sato et al., 2023; Joksimović et al., 2018; Teräs et al., 2020). Within this evolving context, engagement has become a mediated practice shaped by the interplay of human agency and technological design (Parida et al., 2023), emerging not as a fixed state but as a negotiated process continually balanced between empowerment and regulation.

This paper reflects on how student engagement is currently conceptualised and practised in higher education, using a techno-humanistic lens to make sense of recent shifts. It examines how engagement has developed into a dynamic and ethically shaped process in which students, educators, and technologies work together to negotiate participation, meaning, and relationships across digital and physical spaces. In this view, technology is not separate from learning but intertwined with humanistic values such as autonomy, creativity, and care, extended through ethical awareness to address the moral dimensions of learning in digitally mediated environments (see Cook-Sather et al., 2021). For example, the integration of digital systems introduces tensions between care and automation, or between student agency and algorithmic nudging, which must be navigated ethically. Accordingly, while these systems can enhance connection and participation, they also shape engagement through automated processes, highlighting the ongoing moral and relational work required in contemporary learning platforms (see Selwyn et al., 2023).

A techno-humanistic lens, thus, highlights the relational, agentic, and infrastructural dimensions that shape how human connection, reflection, and ethical responsibility

are fostered in post-pandemic higher education, demonstrating that prevailing understandings of student engagement remain incomplete without recognising the techno-humanistic conditions in which engagement now unfolds.

Engagement as a Humanistic and UNESCO-Aligned Ideal

Humanistic education emphasises self-actualisation, creativity, and personal growth (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961). It views learning as a process of becoming fully human through authentic relationships and experiences. Noddings (2013) extends this perspective by highlighting the ethical responsibility embedded in educational relationships, showing how care for others can guide teaching and learning. This aligns with UNESCO's (2021, 2022) vision, where education is presented as a public good that promotes equity, inclusion, and human dignity. The distinction is subtle but important: humanism foregrounds individual development, whereas ethically oriented frameworks situate learning within broader social imperatives.

In post-pandemic higher education, engagement carries both personal and collective significance. It supports students' growth as autonomous, reflective learners while also sustaining inclusive and caring learning communities. Meaningful engagement now involves more than pursuing individual academic goals; it contributes to the shared ethical purpose of education by fostering empathy, dialogue, and mutual responsibility. During periods of remote learning, this became especially visible: small acts of care, such as check-ins, flexible deadlines, and attentive feedback, were seen as vital in maintaining trust and belonging in digital spaces (Northern Illinois University, n.d.). Engagement in contemporary education may thus be understood as a personal, relational, and ethical practice that connects individual flourishing with the broader moral and social purposes of education.

Towards Techno-Humanistic Reflexivity in Student Engagement

In post-pandemic higher education, engagement is best understood as an ongoing, reflexive negotiation among learners, educators, and technology, guided by ethical responsibility. This reflexivity encompasses three interrelated dimensions:

1. Human reflexivity: students and educators reflect on their goals, assumptions, and participation.
2. Technological reflexivity: awareness of how platforms, algorithms, and AI shape learning experiences and relational dynamics.
3. Ethical reflexivity: consideration of equity, inclusion, and care in mediated environments.

These dimensions collectively define what it means to be engaged in post-pandemic higher education. To demonstrate, in a hybrid postgraduate seminar, students participate in an online discussion forum alongside in-class dialogue to analyse weekly readings. As they prepare and post their responses, human reflexivity occurs when students reflect on their interpretations of the material and how their contributions

relate to those of their peers. Technological reflexivity emerges when both students and the educator become aware of how the digital platform shapes participation (e.g., how threaded discussions, notification systems, or AI-assisted writing tools influence when and how students contribute). Ethical reflexivity develops when the class considers issues such as the appropriate use of AI tools, fair participation in group work, and the importance of respectful dialogue in online spaces.

In this way, engagement today extends rather than replaces earlier models: what was once understood primarily in terms of motivation, participation, or presence has evolved into a reflexive process that integrates purposeful awareness, ethical responsibility, and relational co-agency among learners, educators, and technologies. Building on relational, co-constructed, and purpose-driven theories of engagement (e.g., Bryson, 2014, 2016; Kahu & Nelson, 2018), this perspective extends those foundations into hybrid and technology-mediated contexts, where human and digital actors together shape the conditions of learning and connection, and where ethical awareness is required to navigate issues of inclusion, equity, privacy, and the responsible use of technology. Engagement today may thus be described as an ongoing negotiation within an entangled field of human and technological agency (Bayne, 2015), a dynamic moral and epistemic practice that calls for continuous reflection on how agency, care, and belonging are enacted and sustained in digitally mediated educational spaces.

Conclusion

This paper reflects on the evolving nature of student engagement in post-pandemic higher education, where technological innovation and humanistic values increasingly intersect. Engagement is no longer simply about participation or presence; it is a complex, reflexive process shaped by the dynamic interplay of learners, educators, and digital environments. In hybrid and technology-mediated contexts, engagement involves ethical awareness, relational care, and active participation, extending socio-cultural theories into contemporary practice.

Adopting a techno-humanistic lens helps make sense of these developments. From this perspective, engagement is a moral and epistemic practice in which learners and educators negotiate meaning, belonging, and responsibility across physical and digital spaces. Reflexivity unfolds across three interconnected dimensions: human, technological, and ethical. Humanistic principles resonate with UNESCO's (2021, 2022) vision of education as a public good, linking personal growth to collective well-being, while technology mediates participation, shapes interactions, and introduces new ethical and relational considerations.

In this way, engagement remains a humanising and transformative force, connecting individual development with ethical and social imperatives in hybrid and technology-enhanced learning environments. Recognising these techno-humanistic conditions challenges educators and institutions to design learning environments that harness digital innovation while deliberately cultivating care, agency, and ethical responsibility.

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