Barriers to Student Engagement in HE: Revisiting Concepts of Alienation

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to revisit concepts of student alienation in Higher Education (HE), as originally presented by Mann (2001). The paper considers Mann's (2001) theoretical ideas in the current HE climate through a brief review of existing and current HE literature, policy, legislation and practice. This review leads to the development and discussion of an additional theoretical concept of student alienation, which posits that the student's psychosocial self-concepts lead to mistrust or trust.   The paper concludes that in the current HE sector barriers to student engagement could be reduced and success rates increased, if institutions were to consider developing practice aligned to theories of alienation.

Introduction

This paper explores the definition and concept of alienation as a potential barrier to student engagement in a bid to offer deeper understanding of its impact within current HE practice. The paper also puts forward an additional psychosocial theory to expand the concept of student alienation within HE.

Alienation in general terms is defined as**, '***the state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved'* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). Mann (2001, p7) discusses surface, strategic and deep approaches to learning, and highlights that within these learning

processes students could be experiencing varying degrees of alienation between, '…*the subject and process of study itself'*. She further explains that students could be undertaking both a passive and an active role to fulfil their desires for success, with a reliance on others that can affect the process of successful learning and lead to feelings of alienation. This suggests that students' '… *alienated or engaged experiences of learning*…' (ibid, p8) impact on their success; this is influenced by their interest in the subject of study, how embedded they are in the learning experience and by the relationships encountered as part of their HE journey.

Current Theories of Alienation

According to Crosling et al, (2008) student engagement is connected to the success and the retention of HE students.   This indicates that both academic and social elements can lend themselves to students experiencing feelings of alienation. Key factors are communication and relationships with both staff and peers, which can be fostered and encouraged through the teaching and learning activities that take place both in and out of the classroom. Crosling et al (2008, p3) recognise that there can be a '…*mismatch between* [students'] *aspirations and interests and those offered by their course'.*   In these situations, having or creating a '…*climate that involves students and provides feedback on their study efforts means that they are more likely to study successfully*…' (ibid). This suggests that students who continue to engage, regardless of any mismatch between their aspirations and interests, do so as a result of positive relationships with teaching staff and peers. These ideas align and underpin Mann's (2001) theories of alienation; in particular, her perspectives on positioning, the student as the outsider, recognising students' existing knowledge and students being disciplined into docility by the assessment practice. Crosling et al (2008) highlight the importance of diversity within the HE environment, as each student brings with them differing perspectives, ideas and viewpoints on matters which contribute to and enrich the HE experience. By contributing, students are becoming embedded within the experience leading to stronger engagement and minimisation of alienation. Again, this could indicate some correlation with Mann's (2001) theory of the students' creativity being ensconced within the teaching and learning

process, to again reduce the impact of alienation as a barrier to student engagement.

Clouder et al (2012, p33) explain that *'Engagement is both a pre-requisite for learning to occur and a binding agent that allows learning to keep occurring. Assessment can, therefore, focus students' minds, but does not necessarily engender student engagement'.* In this they agree with Mann (2001, cited in Clouder et al, 2012, p33) who suggests; that '…*when students perceive assignments as outputs to be produced, they are more likely to be alienated than engaged'.* This would indicate that student barriers to access and engagement in the assessment process can also lead to feelings of alienation.

Grace and Gravestock, (2009, p35) discuss students' prior learning and knowledge from an inclusion and diversity point of view, and highlight that '*It has sometimes been the practice in UK HE to suggest to students that they forget whatever they have previously learnt of a subject because university approaches are very different to* [sic] s*chool ones'.* They go on to explore the possibility of this approach being '*unhelpful*', suggesting that perhaps it would be more appropriate to attempt to use prior knowledge more constructively within the HE environment. They recommend that student transitions could be improved by building on this background knowledge to support the students, and embed inclusive practice in the HE environment (Grace and Gravestock, 2009). This idea sits well with Mann's (2001) suggestion relating to the student as the outsider where lack of consideration of prior student knowledge (or transitions) can produce feelings of alienation, which in turn can create barriers for student engagement. This could indicate the importance of the process of institutional initial assessments and the involvement of course leaders to identify student needs right from the outset of the students' HE journey.

A brief exploration of the seven alienation theories discussed by Mann (2001) is given below, drawing on an analysis of existing alienation literature. The introduction of an additional alienation theory (Theory 8 - Mistrust versus Trust) is subsequently presented for further consideration.

Theory 1 – The Postmodern Condition: The Sociocultural Context

This idea addresses students' motivation for entering into HE. It explores the concept that some students drift into HE as a pathway which is a socially constructed societal expectation, leading to alienation (Mann, 2001). This includes, for example, those who enter HE because of a family expectation rather than any sense of true vocation at that particular point in their lives. This issue is exacerbated by Government policy to promote widening participation (HEFCE, 2016) and yet provision to support students to succeed once they are accepted into HE is limited. This leads to the possibility of what Mann (2001) calls postmodern alienation.

If institutions had a better understanding of this concept they might respond more effectively to students' underlying motivation, with the prospect of reducing this form of alienation. However, the idea of postmodernism which '…*signals the emergence of a period of multiple changes in society, involving information advances, consumerism,…*' (Bloland, 2005, p123) needs to be taken into account here, especially with the changing landscape of HE. This now encompasses increased vocational and apprenticeship degree pathways to encourage student admissions (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2016). The Government and political demand for the development of vocational degree programmes could offer new insights into the societal idea of the sociocultural context in relation to alienation.

Theory 2 – The Student Positioned as Subject/Object: The Primary Discourse

This theory posits that the student's identity is formed by the subject the student studies, and by the nature of the student's relationship to lecturers. This can create constraints based on discourse; that is, the student enters HE positioned as student, learner, competitor, debtor, consumer, whereas more powerful others (lecturers, more experienced students) have greater facility, knowledge and understanding of the discursive practices. As a result, first year students are more estranged from language, culture and practices

than second year students who have gained this knowledge and experience.

Clouder et al (2012, p47) identify the theoretical concept of positioning within the assessment process:

> '…*assessment can act as a critical point to challenge the dissonance or discomfort in relation to power issues. And yet the difficulty for students is that they are expected to critically challenge the same context in which they are assessed. Assessment in this metaphor can act to disempower students and stifle the very nature that HE strives to create'*.

Therefore, it could be suggested that whilst the HE experience is intended to create critical thinkers, the very systems in place to evidence these abilities actually restrict the development and growth of learners.

Theory 3 – The Student as the Outsider: Knowledge, Power and Insight

This theoretical concept is considered by Mann (2001) to apply most strongly to non-traditional students such as those on low income, working class students, or those progressing from vocational backgrounds who have gained occupational experience from working within the field. This concept could also include mature students or those returning to study in later life. Students in these categories may experience a sense of being an outsider, or not having a sense of ownership of the HE system because they have been separated from academia up until this point. It should be acknowledged that this notion of alienation might also apply to the traditional student. However, it is perhaps considered more strongly by those who have not experienced the academic learning environment in the more traditional sense.

From this theoretical perspective, the student is entering a new land, in which they feel estranged in terms of their own culture, language and desires. The demands of learning the language of academic discourse and processes may require the student to repress their

existing language, culture and desires, all of which they may need for engaging in learning (Mann, 2001). In respect of alienation, this suggests that the academic discourse, culture and language of the institution can contribute to the creation of potential barriers to engagement for HE students, with those most affected being the non-traditional students (Crosling et al, 2008).

Theory 4 – Bereft of the Capacity for Creativity: The Teaching and Learning Process

If the student is reliant on more powerful others (lecturers, or more experienced students) and more powerful events (wider institutional and programme related, such as assessment types and submission deadlines) then being situated in a learning environment where individual student creativity is not authenticated by relationships and contexts, leads to a loss of a sense of self and desire, leading to alienation. This means that students' compliance within the teaching and learning environment can stifle their ability to be creative (Mann, 2001). However, it could be argued that individual student creativity within the teaching and learning process can take place, although this may be difficult to manage in terms of the current bureaucratic assessment processes. Institutions would need to be able to offer greater flexibility and choice for students which would allow for individual creativity and inclusivity.   Furthermore, in HE for example, '…*the student's creativity can only be too easily stolen by a lecturer who knows too muc*h' (Mann, 2001, p13). This suggests that more powerful others can create a climate of alienation due to the very nature of their knowledge and positioning. Similarly, a lecturer who knows too little can also impinge on the students' capacity for creativity, suggesting that the capabilities of the lecturers or more powerful others is another point for careful consideration. Again, this links to the earlier discussion of how student compliancy resulting from the relationships or the expectations of more powerful others and the HE environment can quash student creativity. Further, suggesting that the competency, skills and expertise of the teaching staff and bureaucratic institutional environment can lead to the suffocation of students' creativity.

Clouder et al (2012, p46) reinforce this argument identifying the challenge posed by, *'Assessment* [which is] *highly structured with no*

scope or credit for innovative or creative approaches'. Limiting students' capacity to be creative within the assessment process could theoretically lead to feelings of alienation. Therefore, it could be construed that the assessment process itself could contribute to student alienation by restricting opportunities for student creativity.

Theory 5 – Exiled from the Self: Loss of the Ownership of the Learning Process

Here Mann (2001) examines the implications of emphasising outcome rather than process, such as summative assessment outcomes rather than the formative learning processes. This theory posits the risk of students' alienation from the product of their work, from the process of production of that work, from one's self, and from others. This leads to issues of distribution of power and ownership and the need to recognise the impact this can have on students as part of the educational process.

For example, in meeting the requirements set by the tutor and the institution, the essay (or other output) no longer belongs to the student; rather the student belongs to the essay, because it is a part of a system of exchange. To explain further, the ownership of the essay is that of the student until it is submitted, after which the essay belongs to the institution which exchanges it for a mark or other result, based on the essay's worth as judged in a process from which the student is detached (Mann 2001). Alienation results, as the student becomes embedded within that exchange process at the summative assessment point, rather than being a part of the formative process that led to it. The formative assessment process is lost within these institutional practices. However, it can be recognised that within the assessment process, embedding practice and reflective practice tasks to meet learning outcomes could minimise this experience of alienation. Including practice and reflective practice tasks within the assessment processes could also lead to reducing the barriers to engagement that Mann (2001) identifies within this concept. However, implementing this integration across disciplines and faculties may be complex.

Theory 6 – Disciplined into Docility: Assessment Practices

This theoretical concept positions students within a hierarchy based on judgements made by those in power, and is discussed by Mann (2001, p14) as '*the power of confession*'. This concept is manifested in a hierarchy of success and expertise, which then positions the student in terms of their judged worth. This hierarchy could be identified as being the institution, the assessment process itself and the teaching and learning requirements fronted by the more powerful teaching staff locating students at a lower level. This is where students' judged worth is then ordered into an expected 'norm' (ibid). This approach can, when linked to low marks or failure, contribute to significant feelings of alienation, thus creating barriers to student engagement. This concept could also lead to feelings of an inability to complete the course or insecurities in relation to competence and self-worth for the student. This is connected to some of the ideas discussed earlier – such as theory 4: 'bereft of the capacity for creativity' – as the processes are set within an institutional bureaucratic hierarchy. This idea may then lead students to the 'leave me alone' strategy, explored in theory 7 below. The point here is to highlight a domino and possible cumulative effect in relation to student alienation, whereby the impact of several of these theoretical ideas can become interconnected or interrelated, leading to increased pressure.

Theory 7 – Leave Me Alone: Alienation as a Strategy for Self-Preservation

The notion of 'leave me alone' is about a student's sense of self arising from constant interplay between reflected images of 'self' and images of how others view them (Mann, 2001). Learning has the potential to distress or confuse, when students have to take steps into the unknown. In many ways, it is much safer not to engage at all but to stay in the ordered world in which learning is supressed by the student. In this situation students may aim to conserve themselves by approaching the unknown using a tactical, superficial approach to teaching and learning, rather than entering into a deep or strategic learning mode (Marton and Säljö, 1976). For example, a surface approach might be adopted by a student evidencing some level of engagement within the teaching and learning environment; when

work is submitted or when the student appears to be taking an active role within the classroom. However, what transpires is a direct discourse between the formative and summative picture and students who appear to be coping in this new land, are exposed by the assessment process, they then enter into a 'leave me alone' self-preservation status. From this perspective, surface approaches to student learning could be seen to be a means of escape from the discord between the reality of the requirements of study, and the individual's attempts to escape them. It could be that the student is attempting to maintain their own individual identity besides that of being a student; the struggle to reconcile or come to terms with changes in and between identities.

Barriers to engagement aligned to this idea of 'leave me alone' alienation could take the form of withdrawal from teaching and learning, from the institutional culture, from the assessment process, and from taking part, as a way for students to preserve or protect their sense of self.

Proposed Theory 8 – Mistrust versus Trust: Psychosocial Concept

This view is based on the psychosocial idea of self-concept (Hayes and Orrell, 1993) which can be associated with the idea of student alienation. This idea also sits closely with the previous discussion of the 'leave me alone' student alienation theoretical perspective.   The notion of psychosocial theory is clarified by Howe (cited in Walker and Crawford, 2010, p28), as being '*created by the interplay between the individual's psychological condition and the social environment'.* Psychosocialists investigate human behaviour linked to the social environment and Howe explains: '*the term psychosocial describes an approach that considers both the individual psychology and the social context of people's lives on their individual development'* (ibid)*.* According to Schaffer (2000) self-concept affects individuals based on their experiences, especially relating to accomplishment and failure coupled with feelings of capability or ineffectiveness.

The idea of self-concept is also linked to self-esteem which refers to an individual's feelings of his or her own worthiness and competence. Schaffer (2000, p164) explains it as:

> ' *…the evaluative aspect of the self-system* [which] *is related to the image of an ideal self that we all have: where there is little discrepancy between the ideal and the perceived real self the individual will experience high self-esteem; where the discrepancy is great, on the other hand, low self-esteem is the result'.*

Schaffer (2000) considers that individuals' self-concept can range from low to high with the ability to move up or down this continuum in response to the individual's changing conducts and evaluation of the magnitude of their own failed experiences resulting from self-set standards. Within a HE environment students' self-esteem depends considerably on the individual self-concept of a student and how they are able to regulate their self-concept continuum in response to their HE experiences. The indication of a changeable continuum leads to an assumption that there is scope for a student's self-esteem to be increased or decreased, depending on their own view of themselves, but also in response to evaluation by others. This leads to a link between the psychosocial idea of self-concept and the notion of mistrust (low) versus trust (high).

Erikson (1995, cited in Walker and Crawford, 2010, p28) - albeit in relation to early childhood - considered that 'trust versus mistrust' is, '...*based on the consistency of the caregiver'*; the caregiver in the HE context is the institution or its staff. He added that, '*if trust is developed successfully then this develops confidence and security in the world around them*'; again, in the HE context this aligns to the student (ibid). He proposed that once trust is established the individuals concerned are able to feel secure, even when feeling under threat, suggesting a high individual self-concept status. However, if this first stage of Erikson's 'trust versus mistrust' concept is not successfully established then this can result in an inability to trust and creates fear about what is seen as the inconsistent world. According to Walker and Crawford (2010, p28), '*this can result in anxiety, increased insecurities and an over feeling of mistrust in the world around them'*, and is classed as a crisis stage. The successful progression through this first stage of trust development within the HE context could lead students to positive outcomes including healthy and ongoing development. If this initial stage of development

on the trust versus mistrust continuum is not successfully achieved, within the HE context, it may be that students' feelings of alienation based on their own individual self-esteem and self-concept could restrict their ability to move forward successfully. The result may be the creation of new barriers to student engagement. Awareness of the influences of this concept could enable institutions to consider practical strategies to address the impact of the trust versus mistrust concept on the relationship between the internal world of the student and the social environment in which they are positioned as part of their degree programme.

Erikson's idea (1995, cited in Walker and Crawford, 2010, p28) of trust versus mistrust as a first stage of child development has been adapted here, in the context of HE students, and aligned with alienation theory.   Whereas Erikson's idea was firmly set as a stage of development, it is proposed here as an additional eighth alienation theory, alongside Mann's (2001) seven theoretical perspectives.

This eighth theory of psychosocial alienation is based on the assumption that students whose self-concept is based on lower self-esteem appear more mistrustful of the HE experience and, therefore, suffer feelings of alienation which lead to barriers to engagement. Here mistrust versus trust is presented as a continuum that can change from low to high levels of trust according to the state of the student's self-concept. However, movement from one point to another either up or down this scale (for example, from a position of mistrust to one of trust) could be dependent on the influences of the institution and aspects of the HE experience.

According to Tarquin and Cook-Cottone (2008) the impact of relationships with teaching staff or more powerful others links to the self-concept status of the student, and this could be located along a mistrust versus trust continuum. For example, James (2000, cited in Carless 2006) discusses the idea of mistrust in relation to the feedback process, and in particular when students are dissatisfied with their results or feedback and how this can have a '…*potentially negative impact on students' self-perception and confidence'*. This suggests that the impact of this process and how it is interpreted by the student can influence the student's feelings of alienation.

For example, students' gradation of the mistrust versus trust continuum could be based on teaching staff competency, assessment processes and institutional procedures. Furthermore, Tarquin and Cook-Cottone (2008, p16) identify a '…*correlation between self-concept and student alienation'.* This further evidences the psychosocial impact of mistrust versus trust within an HE environment, which can lead to possible barriers to student engagement.

To reinforce this premise, Carless (2013, cited in Ashwin 2015, p103) defines trust as '*one's willingness to be vulnerable based on an investment of faith that the other is open, reliable, honest, benevolent and competent',* acknowledging a system of exchange based on equality of positioning. This means that for successful exchange all parties who are a part of this system need to be willing to be '*honest, reliable, benevolent and competent'* (ibid). However, it needs to be acknowledged that students and teaching staff will determine their own personal levels of trust based on their experiences, their own self-concept status and their own level of investment within this exchange.

Ashwin, (2015, p104) suggests that:

> '*Trust appears to be one of the most crucial emotions that we need to develop as teachers, if we wish to extend agency and autonomy to our students and to see them as essential components in the teaching and learning process*.'

Although it has earlier been acknowledged that trust is part of a two-way exchange, students' feelings of trust could be considered by institutions in a bid to decrease barriers to student engagement based on this theory of alienation. There is clear scope to explore this theoretical perspective in more detail in the future and to strengthen the concept further. This paper proposes that development of understanding to seek strategies to minimise 'mistrust' and establish 'trust' as a way to decrease alienation and increase student engagement, retention and success should be further investigated.

Further Consideration

The alienation theories discussed above lead to the consideration that individual needs of students' personal, emotional and academic wellbeing must be taken into account by institutions if barriers to engagement are to be reduced.   These approaches to HE can be aligned to a social pedagogical approach to HE. According to Smith (cited in Dawes, 2013, p477),

> '*A social pedagogical approach is concerned with the integration of the individual in society and with the promotion of social functioning, inclusion, participation, identity and competence as members of society with shared responsibilities to that society'*.

Smith goes on to explain that social pedagogy is,'…*evident in a number of government-sponsored pilot projects…and in new degree programmes'* (ibid). Whilst social pedagogy does not currently have a clear definition it has been interpreted as the, '…*head, heart and hands'* (Smith cited in Dawes, 2013, p477) of an individual, indicating that the student requires active participation in the learning process aligning with all three of these components. This proposes that if a social pedagogical conceptual framework is applied to student learning by universities then this could aid the reduction of student alienation based on the theories discussed earlier and could result in improved student outcomes.

This analysis of student barriers to engagement and alienation theory further leads to a suggestion of discourse between the institution's desire for the student to succeed and the student's need to feel a part of the HE experience. Mann (2001) presents this argument as student engagement being motivated by institutional outcomes rather than from the stance of a student's feelings of alienation. It could be identified that institutional needs are driving alienation, which in turn could adversely affect the student's learning experience by creating barriers to engagement. The theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper that appear to affect students most predominantly are the power positioning of the institution and of teacher roles or hierarchy, rather than the role of the student themselves. There are, therefore, several ways in which institutions and teachers can consider

changing their practice to reduce barriers to student engagement by aiming to minimise student alienation.

Yorke and Longden, (2004, p124) discuss Tinto's (1993) model which explains that social and academic engagement are crucial factors in relation to student retention or success. They explain how some HE institutions are thinking creatively of ways to develop more interactive teaching and learning opportunities, to foster both academic and social engagement. This idea again aligns with Mann's (2001) theoretical perspectives, suggesting that should the 'social and academic' elements not be embedded deeply enough, then this will adversely affect students' feelings of alienation, and ultimately lead to an increase in barriers to student engagement.

The discussion of alienation raises the question of whether such alienation is inevitable or changeable, and how academic staff and institutions could influence the factors which cause it, in an effort to reduce barriers to student engagement. It could be that lecturers can empathise better with students and open up consultations about the conditions of alienation discussed above. Attempts could be made as suggested by Mann (2001) to dissolve the estrangement experienced through the separation of 'them and us' (students and lecturers), to offer ways of lowering barriers and building better relationships between student and lecturer. The discourses here relate to the wide variety of teaching styles, subject discipline areas and institutional hierarchical systems that can add constraints to the success of embedding effective practice.

Institutions and policy do impose requirements on teaching and learning practices that could be viewed as an attempt to reduce student alienation. For example, involving students within the assessment process, offering a range of assessment types, organising fresher's weeks and student societies to help orientate new students into the new HE landscape. Institutions involve students in student committees and programme boards, as opportunities to hear the student voice. This provides some evidence of determination to embed student social and cultural involvement within the HE experience in an effort to reduce alienation. However, there is still some way to go if a stronger impact

is to be made to reduce barriers to student engagement based on alienation theory and considering the current diverse student market.

CONCLUSION

This paper has revisited concepts of HE student alienation by reviewing alienation theory in the context of the current HE climate and has proposed an additional alienation theory (theory 8 - Mistrust versus Trust: Psychosocial Concept). The paper proposes that this additional alienation theory could be used to further inform ways of working to meet the diverse needs of the growing HE student population by reducing barriers in student engagement. There is much to be learned from the concept of alienation which could have a profound effect on educational practices to aid student success within HE. By taking multidimensional and flexible approaches to alienation theory, HE institutions could begin to further embrace holistic and social pedagogical approaches to student engagement. Institutional understanding of alienation theories in practice could also result in higher student satisfaction and success rates and greater diversity of student intake than hitherto. In times of institutional need to provide evidence and data to support student satisfaction and success rates aligned to funding (TEF, 2016), it would seem sensible to pay heed to developing practices that aim to reduce student barriers to engagement through deeper consideration of alienation theory within the current HE climate.

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