



Personalised Learning for the Student-Consumer

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This paper (written in British English) seeks to contribute to the development of personal tutoring as a key aspect of learner-centric pedagogy, in response to the changing profile of Higher Education (HE) students, especially in terms of the social and cultural capital which they bring with them, which shapes what and how they want to learn, and the marketisation of HE in the United Kingdom. It will challenge some of the prevailing views about student engagement, in order to contribute to the development of learning cultures which are relevant to the 21st century (McWilliam, 2010), and to enable personal tutoring to add value to the experience of *all* students, by explicitly recognising the diverse range of competencies and literacies which students bring to their studies, and enabling students to use these resources to co-create their learning experience. This requires the development of personal tutoring as a means of challenging the hidden curriculum, thereby enabling universities to adapt to students' needs (rather than, or as well as, requiring students to adapt to universities' expectations), through the recognition of personal tutoring as a specific area of academic expertise, and elevating its importance and its contribution to student success, and by enabling it to contribute to the development of *personalised learning* (not just providing *individualised support*). It will be argued that the development of effective personal tutoring, which reflects the diversity of C21st students, requires an approach which transcends the binary opposition between 'student as partner' (SaP) and 'student as consumer' (SaC), which creates a mono-cultural approach to student engagement, by recognising that students are active consumers, already engaged in the development of their own identities, and that the co-creation of their learning experience is one of the ways they do this. This would enable personal tutoring to play a central role in supporting all students to develop their own reflexivity, enabling them not only to pursue a professional career, (and enabling businesses to create a more diverse workforce), but to shape the future of the industries in which they will work.

Keywords: student engagement, inclusive practice, marketisation of higher education, hidden curriculum, co-creation

INTRODUCTION

This paper will argue that students must be understood as student-consumers who will drive much-needed innovation in Higher Education (HE), including the development of personal tutoring as a means of enabling and empowering students to shape their own learning, and thereby transforming HE learning cultures to meet the needs of twenty first century (C21st) students.

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This would involve enhancing the value of personal tutoring in two ways. Firstly, by enabling personal tutoring to be of benefit to *all* HE students, regardless of their previous educational experience and/or the kinds of cultural capital they bring with them, and, secondly, as a means of gathering market intelligence, (i.e., knowing and understanding C21st students), which will drive the development of inclusive practice generally. Personal tutoring has huge potential *both* as an area of activity within which innovative practice can develop, *and* in enabling innovation in other areas of learning and teaching, by facilitating a pluralised approach to student engagement, and thereby enabling co-creation of the curriculum.

Persistent attainment gaps, and students' less than satisfactory experience of academic support (as measured through the National Student Survey), are evidence that personal tutoring is currently failing to add value to the experience of most students, and like many other schemes and frameworks in HE, it can be seen as an example of the 'well-meaning but vague actions which are unlikely to effect change' (Dale-Rivas, 2019, p. 9).

It can be argued that this is because prevailing views about student engagement are preventing change in HE, because they privilege particular ways of learning above others, and promote a mono-cultural approach based on an insistence that the student is not a 'consumer' but a 'partner.' This approach allows only students with already-legitimised cultural capital to actively engage, while alienating students whose already-acquired competencies and literacies are not valued, and do not enable them to engage in the particular ways expected of a 'partner,' where learning is 'personalised' only for students who behave in predictable and acceptable ways. A recognition that students *are* consumers, and an understanding of learner-consumers as highly differentiated and discriminating, would enable the development of a pluralised approach to student engagement, and of personalised learning for *all* students.

Personal tutoring has become increasingly important in HE, as universities seek to develop competitive strategies in response to a number of pressing challenges which increasingly face the HE sector in the United Kingdom (Group for Learning in Art and Design, 2008; Moran and Powell, 2018), which include the creation of a market economy and the changing demographics of its markets.

Some of these strategies are focused on 'selling' what is already offered (e.g., investment in advertising, re-designed websites, and statement buildings), and by highlighting certain aspects of the offer (such as personal tutoring) as 'selling points.' But in order to maintain competitiveness, it is important to understand that 'selling' is not 'marketing' (Brown, 1995), and to implement *marketing* strategies which *develop* our offer, in response to needs of *all* C21st students.

This would require an understanding of student engagement as a means by which individual students co-create their own learning, through practices of meaning-making which actively support personal development and self-transformation, investment in staff development to promote this understanding, and the provision of resources to develop and deliver personal tutoring which is properly student-centered (not just an offer of 'contact' and 'support').

Leadership in HE requires the capacity to recognise the challenge of marketisation as an opportunity to transform our approach to student engagement and personalised learning, from a singular ethos which promotes particular ways of learning, to the recognition of student and staff practices which support diverse and multiple learning styles.

Demographic data tells us that students are more diverse than ever, not only in terms of socio-economic class and ethnicity, but also in terms of 'lifestyle' preferences and cultural identities (UUK, 2018), and in terms of the range of motivations for further study, and the range of expectations of HE. Understanding and valuing these motivations and expectations will allow us to co-create learning experiences which reflect the values of diverse consumer groups, (i.e., to become more inclusive), and to promote diversity as a way of providing choice, through a pluralised approach to learning and teaching; in short, to become properly market-led, (in contrast with the established subject-based research-led approach to curriculum development, which has largely failed to drive innovation in learning and teaching). This requires the development of a new approach to student engagement and personalised learning which recognises the value of diverse sets of knowledges and competences which students have already acquired, and accommodates a far wider range of learning styles. In this context, effective personal tutoring depends on the extent to which the individual student is understood as a 'learner-consumer' (see below).

Across the sector, there is a lack of a shared definition of the role of the personal tutor (Lochrie et al., 2018), and it has been seen to meet a wide range of students' needs, including: being 'an "anchor" for student support systems' (Yale, 2019, p. 534), and providing 'information about... processes, procedures, and expectations, personal and pastoral support, and referral to other sources of information and support...to foster a sense of belonging and integration (*sic*) into university life... (and)... embodies the (*sic*) student relationship with the university' (ibid.) These definitions raise a number of questions, however, about how 'if the university has become more *inclusive* (author's emphasis), to what extent have institutions changed to accommodate, to manage this inclusive student expectation?' (Stephens et al., 2008, p. 451). While 'integration' implies that personal tutors should help students to adapt to 'university life,' a 'sense of belonging' suggests that personal tutoring should somehow facilitate shared values between the university and the student.

As access to HE has widened significantly over the past few decades, a crisis in personal tutoring has emerged, because it has enabled entry to first generation students whose expectations are very different from students who already have the benefit of their parents' knowledge of university life: expectations which, when not met, create stress and anxiety for them, presenting personal tutors with the increasingly challenging problem of how to foster 'integration' into 'university life' for these students, and creating a 'gulf between inclusive policy intentions...and the lived experiences of students and staff' (ibid, p. 449). This crisis is due to the persistence of a 'deficit model' approach to personal tutoring which

propagates an underlying belief that students need to be 'fixed,' rather than fixing the learning culture that they are being expected to adapt to. It also exemplifies the 'troubling paradox of widening access... (which) is that, despite the democratic intentions, (it) has brought an intensification of class and racial inequalities' [Reay, quoted in Speirs (2020), p. 134].

Widening *access* to HE does not in itself enable the development of inclusive practices in learning and teaching, which would enable widening 'participation.' Diversity and inclusion are not the same thing, (Sen, 2019): inclusion is the *explicit* recognition of diversity as a *strength*, and as a (potential) driver of creativity and innovation (Leadbeater, 2008; Shirky, 2008). But the increased diversity of students needs have so far been viewed as a 'problem,' rather than as a potential driver of innovation in HE; and has triggered a 'collective moral panic' (Macfarlane, 2020, p. 12) within HE. These new markets have been stereotyped as 'snowflakes' and 'careerists,' who prioritise value-for-money above the 'love of learning,' rather than being recognised as sophisticated and discriminating consumers who choose their brand loyalties, (i.e., 'sense of belonging'), even more carefully than previous generations (Giammona et al., 2019). This is because they do not conform to the 'ideal' student who would enable HE to continue to deliver the same curricula in the same way, and who is easily 'integrated' into 'university life,' rather than developing innovative approaches to learning and teaching, and especially personal tutoring, which would involve the transformation of 'university life' in response to these students' increasingly diverse and changing needs and expectations. This requires an understanding of the ways students actively engage through a wide range of learning styles and modes of interaction, and by recognising that students' motivations for study (including enhancing their career prospects) are not incompatible with a 'love of learning'; indeed they are mutually supportive.

Understanding and valuing students' motivations and expectations, (rather than seeing them as a problem to be solved), would allow the co-creation of learning experiences which reflect the values of diverse consumer groups (i.e., to become more inclusive), and to promote diversity as a way of providing choice through a pluralised approach to learning and teaching. But advice for personal tutors tends to focus on understanding diverse student populations in terms of more or less 'at risk' groups, and on offering a kind of ongoing 'induction' for students, rather than on diversity in terms of positive and valuable differences.

As an aspect of inclusive practice, personal tutoring is not only, or even primarily, about fulfilling the expectations of the role as described above, or even helping students understand their assessment feedback (Thomas, 2017), because, as useful as these things are, without also providing opportunities for the students' strengths and aspirations to be explicitly recognised and valued, these activities might simply re-enforce a deficit model, where an assumed lack of competence is being addressed, and become increasingly 'therapeutic' (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008).

The potential value of personal tutors is to enable the universities to *know* their students, (i.e., to know what they

bring, what they want to learn, and how they want to learn), and to use this knowledge to drive innovation in learning and teaching, and *change* 'university life,' (rather than expecting all students to 'integrate' with what already exists), and enabling all students to benefit from personalised learning. This requires HE leaders to promote a strong interdisciplinary staff-development ethos, to invest in the development of personal tutoring skills, and to enable advancement through reward and recognition, by elevating the importance of the role and its contribution to student success, and to meeting institutional key performance indicator (KPI) targets. Personal tutoring needs to be recognised and valued as an area of specialist professional expertise, and personal tutors need to be recruited and developed in the same way as other recognised areas of academic specialism. The publication of guides and handbooks for personal tutors (Stork and Walker, 2015; Lochtie et al., 2018) is a promising sign that some universities recognise its increasing importance, but this needs to be accompanied by incentives, support, and forms of recognition, for staff to be able to pursue personal tutoring as an area of specialist professional development.

The discussion which follows is informed by research from across a range of areas including pedagogical theory (Biggs, 1996), theories of taste, consumption and identity (Bourdieu, 1984; Miller, 1995; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996), and debates about innovation in HE (Willis and Gregory, 2016). The broader context for the discussion relates to questions of how institutional cultures impact negatively on the attainment and outcomes of students from under-represented groups (Amos and Doku, 2019; Dale-Rivas, 2019), which are already being addressed through ongoing research, such as recent work on the hidden curriculum (Hinchcliffe, 2020).

The discussion will start by challenging the negative connotations of the notion of the 'student as consumer (SaC),' and by arguing that students use the competences which they have already acquired as consumers, to engage in learning activities as a way of developing their own identities. It will then focus on the hidden curriculum, which prevents already-disadvantaged students from using these competencies to develop their own reflexivity, by prioritising some forms of learning above others, and privileging some forms of cultural capital above others, consequently creating barriers to personalised learning, and exacerbating inequalities. It will be argued that the hidden curriculum is sustained by binary thinking which underpins a spurious distinction between student-as-consumer and student-as-partner, and a mono-cultural approach to student engagement which prevents the competencies and literacies of most learner-consumers from being valued, and is therefore completely at odds with the notion of personalised learning. The discussion will conclude by arguing that personal tutoring has a key role to play in enabling universities to value students as consumers whose changing values, attitudes, and literacies, will drive innovation in HE by enabling universities to accommodate and encourage increasingly pluralised ways of learning, rather than clinging to a culturally conservative belief in value-free learning which serves only to reproduce the values of the white intelligentsia.

THE STUDENT-CONSUMER AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY

To understand and value the student-consumer is to focus on the ‘centrality of the learner’ (Biggs, 1996, p. 348), and on how students engage with learning experiences as a range of commodities through which they invest their already-acquired cultural capital, in the ongoing transformation of their own identities.

‘The learner brings an accumulation of assumptions, motives, intentions, and previous knowledge that envelopes every teaching/learning situation and determines the course and quality of the learning that may take place. . . [And] ‘what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does,’ and the teacher’s role is primarily to adopt ‘a focal awareness of *the learner and the learner’s world*’ (Biggs, 1996, pp.348–349, author’s emphasis).

The students’ previous knowledge includes that which has been acquired through complex interactions with a wide range of commodities, yet the term ‘student-as-consumer’ is routinely used as one of a number of ways in which C21st students are described in pejorative terms, and stereotyped as having ‘consumerist attitudes’ (Macfarlane, 2020, p. 12), in contrast with mythical ‘traditional students’ who are equipped with legitimised cultural capital and motivated only by a ‘love of learning.’

But consumers are not passive recipients of good and services; they are active participants in their production, and have always driven innovation in industry. Consumption is the active (‘creative’) production of socio-cultural distinctions, rather than a passive reflection of distinctions which already exist, and is therefore the ‘vanguard of history’ (Miller, 1995).

Consumption is always necessarily creative, i.e., selective, eclectic and, above all, *unpredictable*. It is this unpredictability which explains why reflexivity is so highly valued in the creative industries, because “no one knows” (Caves, 2005, p. 5) what new forms and practices consumers are going to develop. Brand-owners are increasingly conscious of how discriminating and sophisticated consumers are, in their expectations that the brand must match their changing values (see Noble, 2018), and this is the ‘sense of belonging’ (which personal tutoring is expected to nurture) through which industry enables consumers to become the co-creators of their products, which they use in the ongoing transformation of identities.

It has become accepted amongst cultural theorists that identity is always ‘in production,’ fluid and complex rather than fixed, or determined by socio-economic circumstances. Identities are performative; ‘temporary attachments to subject positions constructed through discursive practices’ (Hall, 1996, p. 6). Identities are developed not in a relation of absolute distinction from others, but through parodic copying/emulation and appropriation which creates hybridisation. This cultural ‘promiscuity’ drives the production of newness and difference, and testifies to the ‘instability and mutability of identities, which are always unfinished, always being remade’ (Gilroy, 1993, p. ix).

Consumer culture is increasingly fragmented into highly differentiated ‘taste cultures’ whose ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984)

articulates the social position of participants. But ‘taste’ is not the *expression* of an already-formed identity, because, as has already been acknowledged, identities are performative, never ‘formed’ but always ‘in production.’ The exercise of taste, and therefore the experience of enjoyment (including the ‘love of learning’), drives the *transformative production* of identities.

As consumers, students engage with learning experiences as a range of commodities through which they invest cultural capital in the transformation of their own identities, and consequently in the development of a global knowledge economy. For example, the graduates of British art schools have arguably driven the success of United Kingdom creative industries during the last 60 years.

It is often assumed that this success is the result of the particular approach to learning and teaching adopted in British art schools, which is practice-based and, supposedly, student-centred. However, it can be argued that this success is not due primarily to a particular pedagogical approach, but to the participation of ‘first generation’ working-class students, which increased the diversity of the student population. This reflected the impact of post-World War Two multiculturalism and social mobility, brought about by the Education Act of 1944, which provided opportunities for working-class children, even though the proportion of working-class students in HE remained relatively small until more recently.

This success was due to the practices involved in using the knowledges and competences which these students had already acquired as consumers of ‘popular culture,’ enabling the products of the creative industries, in which they went on to work, to become much more highly differentiated, reflecting the changing tastes and preferences of more diverse social groups. These students became successful professionals because they became cultural intermediaries, enabling differentiated consumer groups to participate in the development of contemporary culture, as new markets whose tastes and preferences had to be recognised and appealed to, and therefore driving innovation in the creative industries. And it is now widely accepted that the success of the creative industries depends on the diversity of their workforce (Easton, 2015), because creative practice is highly context-dependent, and driven by the diversity of its participants (Negus and Pickering, 2004).

This success was due not to the mere fact that working-class children were given ‘access’ to HE, but to the ability of these first generation students to ‘participate’ in new and different ways, by being allowed to use their consumer competences and literacies to develop their own reflexivity. However, as access to HE has subsequently widened further, the ability to participate has, for first generation students, been stifled by the persistence of the hidden curriculum.

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

There are many ways in which the hidden curriculum exacerbates inequalities, as has already been widely acknowledged (Hinchcliffe, 2020); it will be focused on here as a barrier to personalised learning.

Education is one of the means by which social and cultural hierarchies are reproduced within a capitalist economy (see Bourdieu, 1984), so widening access to HE does not in itself lead to the development of inclusive practices in learning and teaching. Education is only a means of promoting equality to the extent that it fosters reflexivity, i.e., enables individual students to develop their own capacity to recognize the forces of socialisation and to consciously change their thinking and behaviour, through *shaping their own* norms, tastes, politics, and desires. This is completely at odds with an understanding of personal tutoring as an exercise in ‘integration’ and ‘educational socialisation’ (Stephens et al., 2008, p. 450).

One of the competitive strategies being adopted by universities is the development of learning experiences which not only equip students with the skills to compete in the job market, but with ‘graduate attributes’ (such as creativity) which will enable them to *lead and shape* the future of the industries they will work in, and of the new socio-cultural spaces they will create. Vision and Mission statements often include an aspiration to equip students with the ability to *shape* society, as well as to contribute to the economy.

In order to achieve this, universities have to be able to foster students’ reflexivity, which means allowing them to *shape their own* norms, tastes, politics, and desires. But simply having a ‘personal’ tutor (however, attentive the personal tutor is) does not in itself provide the student with the opportunity to develop reflexivity, and certainly not if personal tutoring is understood as a means of ‘integration’ and ‘educational socialization.’ Indeed, having a personal tutor often becomes yet another way of identifying the student’s lack of ‘engagement,’ if the student chooses not to meet with their personal tutor, and merely supports the production of ‘generic learners according to a particular vision of student success’ (Hayes, 2018, p. 19), which treats students not as partners, or even as consumers, but as ‘contractors from whom commitment must be “secured” (ibid., p. 30).

Effective personal tutoring would enable HE to foster students’ reflexivity by explicitly recognising and valuing whatever cultural capital (whether legitimised or not) they bring with them, focusing directly on students’ individual aspirations, and supporting the development of diverse learning styles. But this requires a willingness to address the persistence of the hidden curriculum which continues to ensure that some forms of cultural capital are privileged above others, even when the ‘visible’ curriculum appears to be inclusive.

The hidden curriculum is learned through a range of informal social interactions, and is sustained by a number of unquestioned assumptions about ‘participation’ which, far from being student-centred, inform a culturally specific pedagogy, thereby disadvantaging students who choose not participate in particular ways, or who are already disadvantaged by being first-generation students. The hidden curriculum works in the favour of students whose parents can help them navigate the social subtleties of university life, and who are more likely to fit the description of the ‘traditional student.’

For example, the art school ‘habitus’ (Burke and McManus, 2009; Bhagat and O’Neil, 2011; Orr and Bloxham, 2013) is

sustained by a ‘studio culture’ which depends on a visibly ‘participatory’ environment which, it is assumed, enables ‘active’ learning, in contrast with more solitary and/or cerebral activities (such as ‘working at home’ and/or engaging with the world via the internet), which are assumed to be ‘passive.’ But this is not made explicit or visible, either in course documents or student-facing information, including assessment criteria, and research has shown that art school tutors often make judgements about students, (not just their work), when marking and giving feedback (Orr, 2010; Orr and Bloxham, 2013).

Underpinning these assumptions about ‘participation’ is a binary ‘active v passive’ opposition which seeks to privilege some ways of learning above others, and fails to appreciate the wide range of learning styles which different students might prefer, or might adopt in different situations (For example, commuter students are more likely to prioritise attendance at timetabled lectures, rather than peer-learning activities, and to maintain social interactions within their local community rather than creating new social networks which are campus-based). The ‘active v passive’ opposition fails to acknowledge that reading, viewing, thinking, and using social media, or engaging with a local community, are just as active (and ‘interactive’) as the learning activities which involve visible ‘participation’ in a particular ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998). Worse, it marginalises and alienates those learners who do not conform to acceptable forms of student behaviour which are recognised as evidence of ‘engagement.’ It also prevents the socio-cultural competences which students might continue to develop outside University from being recognised as a legitimate form of learning. These consequences in themselves then generate some of the anxieties which personal tutors are faced with, positioning them as pastoral counsellors (see Austerlitz, 2008), rather than as enablers of reflexivity.

It can be argued that there is no such thing as ‘passive learning,’ and that the use of this term is an example of how C21st students ‘tend to be labelled as lacking in academic integrity’ (Macfarlane, 2020, p. 3) and ‘not adopting the right attitude to study’ (ibid.). Students want to be ‘taught’ (as well as to learn) because they already know that a good teacher will inspire and motivate them, and as consumers they (not unreasonably) also see this as ‘value for money.’ (And, not surprisingly, students from underprivileged backgrounds are more concerned with value-for money than their more wealthy counterparts are). But students’ perception of value-for-money is primarily about the *quality* of teaching, as well the likelihood that the course will enable them to get a well-paid job, in contrast with academics’ assumptions that it is primarily about class size and contact hours (Neves and Hillman, 2019), and an expression of ‘consumerist attitudes’ and an ‘instrumental approach to learning’ (Macfarlane, 2020, p. 12).

The effectiveness of personal tutoring is, from the students’ perspective, ‘to do with the quality of the relationship and genuine feelings of connectedness’ (Yale, 2019, p. 543) engendered through ‘a two-way relationship based on mutual respect and shared responsibility, whereby the availability and purpose of the meeting are seen as negotiated and a joint endeavour’ (ibid., p. 542). This requires the tutor to actively

take an interest in the *student*, as an *asset* to the university, and to use their expertise to provide personalised advice which will enable the student to achieve their own ambitions and fulfil their potential, rather than simply responding to whatever ‘problems’ the student presents by enabling them to become better-integrated, i.e., more like the ‘traditional’ student which is a completely ‘outmoded representation of the diverse contemporary body of learners’ (Macfarlane, 2020, p. 2).

To summarise, the hidden curriculum is underpinned by binary thinking which sustains hierarchies and exacerbates inequalities, which then become part of the ‘problem’ which personal tutors are confronted with. This same binary thinking prevents many forms of engagement from being recognised, not only as valid or meaningful, but as enablers of *personalised learning*.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONALISED LEARNING

As already acknowledged, personal tutoring encompasses a wide range of expectations, and it is also interpreted differently across the sector, but is commonly understood as a means of providing holistic *individualised support* to students, and ‘personalised learning’ tends to be understood as something which is enabled by personal tutor’s ‘close attention’ (Lochrie et al., 2018, p. 75), rather than something which should be enabled by the whole curriculum. In practice, this ‘close attention’ is often reduced to a means of helping to ensure ‘student engagement,’ and in debates about student engagement, the concept of ‘student as partner’ (SaP) is commonly used in opposition (and in preference) to the concept of ‘.’ But it can be argued that this is a spurious distinction which privileges some ways of learning above others, fails to value the cultural competencies and literacies which all students bring with them, and to appreciate the wide range of learning styles which different students might prefer, or might adopt in different situations, and therefore marginalises and alienates learners who do not conform to acceptable forms of student behaviour which are recognised as evidence of ‘active’ engagement, and is therefore at odds with an individualised approach, to enable personalised learning.

The binary opposition (‘active’ vs. ‘passive’) underpins prevailing approaches to student engagement, which need to be challenged if we are to succeed in delivering on the aspirations articulated in Vision and Mission statements, to equip students with graduate attributes such as creativity. Student engagement is ‘the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and *empower* students in the process of shaping the learning experience’ (HEFCE, 2008, p. 8, author’s emphasis). British universities have invested heavily in ways to capture the student voice, and to measure their levels of engagement with their studies, and in using the data to drive change. This data tells us a lot, and especially that *not all students are the same*, e.g., survey data tells us that those students from low participation groups are less satisfied with their courses than those from more privileged backgrounds (Warwick Economics and Development, 2018). However, the relative lack of

effectiveness of this investment, as indicated by National Student Survey (NSS) data, so far, suggests that we are not hearing what students are telling us (Meadows et al., 2016), because the established mono-cultural approach to student engagement is preventing us from hearing the increasingly diverse student voice.

Student engagement is commonly understood to be a singular range of particular and predictable activities (measured by data gathered through check-in systems, virtual learning environment (VLE) and library usage, etc.) which are defined by the institution, rather than a multiple range of diverse and unpredictable activities which are defined by students’ own choices and preferences. Students are expected to ‘engage’ by making use of what is offered, and this ‘engagement’ is measured by the extent to which they do or do not do this, rather than by the extent to which their tutors enable them to develop their reflexivity, and the extent to which the university enables personal tutors to do this, by investing in staff and developing effective tutoring skills. To ‘embed a culture of student engagement’ (see Hayes, 2018), which otherwise exists only as an aspiration in vision and mission (VMS) statements and policy documents, the notion of student engagement, as a means of ‘empowering’ students, needs re-thinking.

The distinction between ‘SaP’ and ‘SaC,’ is based on the assumption that approaching students as consumers is somehow associated with a lower academic performance, whereas approaching students as partners enhances their learning (Senior et al., 2017; Curran, 2018). But this is another of aspect of the ‘myth’ about C21st university students having ‘consumerist attitudes’ and an ‘instrumental approach to learning,’ which is not supported by any evidence (Macfarlane, 2020).

Moreover, there are a number of problems with the concept of ‘students-as-partner,’ including the issue of how to reconcile the power relations between students and staff, to enable equal ‘partnership.’ Students’ awareness of the power relations between themselves and their tutors helps to explain why the experience of receiving feedback is perceived by them as de-motivating and unfair. Research also shows that, far from being supported and enabled, students often feel disempowered by feedback from tutors, which they see as reflecting the values of the tutor (see Blair, 2007; Winstone et al., 2017), rather than a recognition of the student’s own values and ambitions. Personal tutors are often the same staff who are tutoring the same students on specific modules and assignments, requiring them to adopt a somehow objective or neutral position which is at odds with their subject-based tutoring, and requiring students to somehow forget that their personal tutor is likely to be marking their work.

This issue has been responded to by, for example, providing ‘unconscious bias training,’ and by ‘recognising the importance of personal growth for both staff and students’ (Curran, 2018), i.e., that both are learners in the partnership, but it has also been responded to in a largely dismissive way, by simply rejecting the ‘customer-provider’ model of HE and what is perceived to be a ‘dominant SaC ideology’ (ibid.). However, it can be argued that simply acknowledging that both staff and students are learner in the partnership, and providing unconscious bias training, does not reconcile the power relations

between students and staff: indeed these can be ways of simply masking them.

This distinction between SaC and SaP is a spurious one which fails to value the cultural competencies and literacies which students bring with them *as consumers*, and fails to acknowledge the centrality of meaning-making – creating and interacting with diverse forms of representation – to student practices.

As previously mentioned, consumers engage in the transformative production of their identities through the exercise of taste, and we know that students achieve more when they enjoy learning. Therefore, students' enjoyment, rather than the extent to which they participate in particular activities, would be a more meaningful way to measure their 'engagement.' Pleasure and enjoyment are not inherent features of experiences, but the effects of experiences which provide opportunities to use socially specific skills and competences (cultural capital) which have already been acquired, in the ongoing transformation of self-identity (through reflexivity and cultural promiscuity). Students have their own criteria for assessing the value of learning experiences, which is often completely at odds with the values of staff, e.g., lectures rated highly by peer observers are not necessarily rated highly by students, who expect lectures to 'add value' to material which could be accessed elsewhere (Smiles, 2018), which explains why students often choose not to attend (Kashif and Basharat, 2014), and the amount of time which students choose to spend on assessments is determined not by the weightings given by academics but by their own tastes and preferences (Attenborough et al., 2018, p. 16). Furthermore, students' perceptions of their own development are partly through their engagement with non-study activities (Neves and Stoakes, 2018).

Generation Z are proving to be the most discriminating and sophisticated consumers yet to enter HE. 'Students (now) have high expectations of their university experience and what it can offer them in order to improve their lives. Diversity across the sector indicates that there is no one "student experience": rather individual students have their own experience. It is therefore our responsibility to provide our students access to . . . opportunities. Which will transform their lives' (Shelton, 2018, p. 7). And research (see Yorke and Longden, 2008) shows that there is no one single element of the student experience that can be controlled to enhance satisfaction. 'The (*sic*) student experience' is not 'something generic that can be 'delivered' (Hayes and Jandric, 2018, p. 133) by universities; it is produced by students themselves, in diverse, creative, and unpredictable ways, and 'can only be discussed in the plural' (*ibid*, p. 137). And as for all other consumers, it is students that determine the value of their experience.

Evidence gathered through research at the University of Derby in 2015 highlighted students' *personal* expectations and priorities, and that student satisfaction is determined not only by motivators (e.g., students' individual goals and achievements, leading to perceived satisfaction when fulfilled), but also by factors (including the hidden curriculum) which are beyond the individual's control. The research demonstrated the significance of both academic opportunities, (in relation to which students'

priorities are based primarily around intellectual challenge and career aspirations), and of other priorities such as building social networks, which depend on the social and cultural aspects of student life.

This research resulted in the introduction of a Student Experience Framework, intended to be inclusive of all learning styles. However, because the University explicitly positions its students as 'partners' but '*not* as consumers' (p. 8, author's emphasis), the research neglected to capture the diversity of students' notions of their own 'total' experience, to enable an inclusive understanding of the lived experience of students, so the resulting framework contradicts the principle that 'there is no one student experience,' and re-enforces an established and singular notion of student engagement as 'active participation' in a relatively narrow and prescriptive range of activities, (e.g., international study trips, and involvement in University processes and projects). This re-enforces conservative and culturally specific notions of acceptable student behaviour and, far from embracing diversity, re-asserts the values of the middle-class intelligentsia, for whom these activities have inherent value. An inclusive framework would not only recognise a much wider range of forms of 'lived experience' as 'active' engagement, but would embrace the *unpredictability* of what these might be, as the learner-consumer engages in their own self-transformation.

To develop inclusive practices in learning and teaching in response to the changing profile of HE students, we need to develop a more sophisticated socio-material approach to student engagement, where agency is understood to involve objects and artefacts as well as students and staff (see Gourlay, 2015; Latour, 2005). To do this, we need to move away from the prioritisation of Student-as-Partner above Student-as-Consumer, by recognising that students are learner-consumers who are actively engaged (as all consumers are) in the development of their own identities through the constant appropriation of objects and experiences, through a wide range of learning styles and modes of interaction.

The concept of 'SaP' masks the power relations between student and academic (and even supports the coercion of students into 'subject positions in the service of the ideologies of the more powerful') because it derives from a discourse where 'participation' is understood only as 'a desirable set of practices' (Gourlay, 2015, pp. 402, 404) rather than in terms of the complex day-to-day practices involved in 'being a student,' as a temporally situated social practice. These practices involve a range of literacies and competencies which students have already acquired as consumers. But in prevailing discussions of student engagement, what students bring is valued less than what they are *expected* to do, and what appears to support a 'student-centred' ethos is simply a re-enforcement of culturally specific notions of acceptable student behaviour. The academic orthodoxy of student engagement attributes it to technology, documents, and frameworks, rather than to the practices of staff and students (see Hayes, 2018).

'Normative notions of student behaviour' (*ibid.*) are clearly culturally specific, and reproduce white middle-class values, which explains why survey data tells us that students from low-participation groups are less satisfied with their course than those from more privileged backgrounds.

Students co-create their learning experiences through the active selection and appropriation of the resources which universities provide, along with whatever other resources (including social and cultural commodities and experiences) they may have access to, and choose to engage with. Like all consumers, students are learning all the time, and making their own choices about what is interesting, appealing, useful, meaningful, and/or enjoyable, i.e., they are *discriminating*, *reflexive*, and *promiscuous*. This might mean *not* engaging with some aspects of their course, and selecting and appropriating objects, images, and experiences (none of which are inherently more ‘interactive’ than others), to build on their already-acquired cultural capital and create their own new knowledges and competences. This is what personal tutors need to focus on and to support, and to be trained in the ability to do this.

The ‘student-as-partner’ approach to student engagement fails to acknowledge the centrality of meaning-making, i.e., creating and interacting with forms of representation, to student practices and subjectivities. ‘The day-to-day business of being a student is saturated with a range of complex textual (including the visual and the multimodal) practices, both face-to-face and online. These texts are not merely means of information transfer, but are constitutive of both disciplinary and individual knowledge, and also *identities*’ (Gourlay, 2015, p. 406, author’s emphasis). ‘(W)hen learning is exciting and potentially transformative, students and lecturers may feel an intensely personal flow of engagement’ and ‘this powerful sense of connection with the subject matter and with the other people in the classroom promotes a passion for learning’ (Hayes, 2018, p. 31).

To summarise, a mono-cultural approach which privileges student-as-partner over student-as-consumer arguably prevents student engagement, and *stifles* students’ reflexivity, (and ‘love of learning’), by failing to value whatever cultural competencies and literacies they bring with them, regardless of the types of media with which they have interacted to acquire them, and regardless of the types of learning activities through which they wish to develop them.

INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Not only does a mono-cultural approach to student engagement exacerbate inequalities amongst students; it also prevents the ‘student voice’ from driving innovation in HE. In a highly competitive environment, leadership in HE is, above all else, about enabling innovative practice to flourish. And personal tutoring has the potential to provide the means of enabling students’ changing values, attitudes, and literacies, to drive innovation in HE, by allowing students to use their already-acquired knowledges, competencies, and literacies, to co-create their learning experiences and develop their own reflexivity, and thereby enabling universities to change learning cultures and accommodate increasingly pluralised ways of learning.

But the notion of students as co-creators of their learning is a ‘wicked problem’ for universities (Willis and Gregory, 2016), partly because the fear of confusing co-creation with being driven by ‘conspicuous consumption’ (Senior et al., 2018) is stronger than the commitment to inclusive practice. Consequently, while

‘co-creation is often spoken about as a pedagogical strategy . . . There is little evidence of implementation’ (Willis and Gregory, 2016, p. 1), and it is reduced to merely enabling the ‘student voice,’ through which good NSS results can be used to justify the *lack* of innovation.

Innovation in HE is too often understood simply as a matter of promoting ‘new’ tools (e.g., ‘technology enhanced learning’), and, without a more sophisticated approach to student engagement and personalised learning, this merely de-values some learning activities and re-enforces this spurious distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ engagement. Institutional policies which ‘promote (mainly) economically linked successes of student engagement. . . alienate the outcomes of teaching from the (staff and students) who produce them. Ultimately, ‘missing out’ this human content, as more embodied forms of learning, may well be self-defeating in reducing, rather than increasing, innovation’ (Hayes, 2018, p. 32).

Personal tutoring has huge potential both as an area of activity within which innovative practice can develop, and as a means of knowing and understanding student-consumers, i.e., gathering market intelligence to drive innovation in all aspects of learning and teaching. Persistent attainment gaps are evidence that it is currently failing to add value to the experience of most students, and like many other schemes and frameworks in HE, it is, so far, an example of the ‘well-meaning but vague actions which are unlikely to effect change’ (Dale-Rivas, 2019, p. 9). Such initiatives need to be backed up by recognition of the work of staff, as well as students, in making them effective, by developing the skills to be able to do this, and by a willingness to acknowledge and address the ways in which the hidden curriculum continues to undermine them.

Creative industries learned long ago that innovation does not ‘trickle-down’ but is consumer-led (King, 1963), and the history of consumer cultures shows us that markets are complex, continually shifting, and subject to fragmentation, because consumers have developed competencies and literacies which enable them to be increasingly reflexive and culturally promiscuous, and therefore unpredictable.

As with any market-orientated enterprise, innovation requires a willingness to take informed risks, but increased competition, league tables, and teaching excellence framework (TEF) metrics have tended (so far) to intensify the risk-averse tendencies of universities.

Universities in the United Kingdom which have made some progress in narrowing attainment gaps have achieved this by recognising (implicitly at least) that students are learner-consumers, in that they have socially and culturally specific values and tastes through which they develop their own identities. For example, Kingston University London has introduced an Inclusive Curriculum Framework (Amos and Doku, 2019, p. 30) which seeks to ensure that individual learners see themselves reflected in the curriculum (just as the producers of all commodities seek to ensure that consumers see themselves reflected in their products), and De Montfort University has established a pedagogical model (Universal Design For Learning) which reflects an awareness of the unique needs of individual learners in a wide variety of learning contexts, to create learning experiences that remove barriers from the learning environment,

which provides students with choices about how they acquire information, and with multiple means of engagement which take into account learner's interests and preferences, and which allows learners to demonstrate their understanding in alternative ways (Merry, 2018).

Most universities now claim to enhance students' employability, but so far there have been relatively few new pedagogical strategies to support this, and disciplinary boundaries tend to prevent new strategies from being developed. For example, we know that interdisciplinarity has driven innovation in the creative industries, because media and practices have converged, and 'hybrid' practitioners are more likely to progress to professional jobs (see Cox, 2005; Bakhshi et al., 2013; Bakhshi and Yang, 2018). Yet most students are still taught by a relatively small course team, without access to the expertise in other departments, and the majority of academics, including personal tutors, are entirely focused on their own discipline, encouraged to do this by an environment where curriculum currency is reduced to 'research informed teaching,' and where 'research' is almost always subject-based. Personal tutors are ideally placed to play a key role in enhancing employability by supporting students in developing their reflexivity, but this is a specialist skill which requires development and support and, as already mentioned, personal tutors are often already tutoring the same students on their modules and assignments which are subject-focused, while the work of helping students to develop their Personal Development Plans, CVs, and professional profiles, is routinely 'out-sourced' to careers advisors.

Innovation in HE requires the development of an interdisciplinary 'learning culture' in response to C21st economic and social contexts (see McWilliam, 2010), e.g., by contributing to the 'STEAM' (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics) agenda. The development of an interdisciplinary learning culture is fundamentally linked to questions of student engagement – indeed the two projects are mutually dependent, because student engagement (and personal tutoring) is about the student, not the subject.

Many practices in HE have remained unchanged for more than a century, and the failure to innovate is due to a failure to recognise that innovation is consumer-led. Effective leadership would promote a staff development ethos to support personal tutoring as a creative practice, i.e., a practice which is responsive to students' constantly changing expectations and aspirations, and as an opportunity for specialist professional development. While many academics are engaged in pedagogical research, and often showcase impressive examples of innovative practice (including in personal tutoring) at learning and teaching conferences, these individuals often struggle to disseminate innovative practice within their own institutions, where innovation in learning and teaching is often not incentivised or recognised except in tokenistic ways. Consequently, while some students may benefit from having an excellent personal tutor who does recognise and value the students' own literacies and competences, institutional structures do not ensure that this is adopted across the institution, indeed they often prevent it.

In order to live up to universities' commitments to inclusive practice, HE leaders need to ensure that research and staff development strategies are focused on innovation which is informed by the knowledges, literacies and aspirations which *all* students bring with them, (rather than solely on the discipline/subject), i.e., to allow innovation to be led by student-consumers.

CONCLUSION

The commodification and marketisation of HE is often perceived as a threat to its accessibility, but access is not in itself inclusive, indeed can be just the opposite. It can be argued that it is only a threat if we cling to a culturally conservative belief in value-free learning, which serves only to reproduce the values of the white intelligentsia. This belief underpins the binary Student-as-Consumer vs. Student-as-Partners opposition which is not only spurious, but is preventing HE from developing innovative inclusive practices. An increasingly competitive landscape provides HE leaders with the opportunity to actively demonstrate their commitments to student-centeredness and inclusivity, through personalised learning, by recognising that students are learner-consumers, actively engaged (as all consumers are) in the transformation of their own identities.

The purpose of HE is not to compensate for an assumed unequal distribution of competences and literacies, but to recognise what *all* students bring to their learning, to encourage them to use these resources, and to value the unexpected ways in which they might do this. Personal tutoring currently functions primarily to prevent, identify and address non-engagement, where engagement is understood only as a particular set of behaviours, but it has the potential to become the means by which individual students can develop their reflexivity, enabled by the tutor's recognition and affirmation of whatever knowledge and competence they bring with them, and of their preferred ways of learning. This would enable universities to accommodate and develop a much more pluralised range of ways of learning, to reflect a much more heterogeneous mix of students, and provide properly 'personalised' learning.

This requires the concept of the learner-consumer to be embraced, and best practice in personalised learning to be embedded across the institution, allowing *all* students to benefit. Setting up a Personal Tutoring Scheme provides a framework, but personal tutors need to be supported and developed to work with students on developing their reflexivity, while also enabling the universities to *know* their students, to use this knowledge to drive innovation in learning and teaching, and to transform 'university life' so that it reflects the diversity of its participants.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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