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14 Student Engagement Before and After the Global Pandemic

A Case of International Students in a Pre-Sessional English for Academic Purposes Programme (PEAP)

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003366942-17

After-COVID Universities and Their Students

The COVID-19 pandemic has divided the world of universities into two categories—before and after COVID-19 (hereafter BC and AC) (Barnett, 2020). The AC universities are moving to a new hybrid approach to teaching and learning with a combination of on-campus and online learning, raising indirect and longer-term intellectual, social, and financial issues. One of these approaches is the pedagogical question of engaging students in the new delivering mode, either online or blended. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students engaged differently depending on their characteristics. Learning and teaching at universities have long adopted technological elements in teaching. However, in the AC context, the uncertainty accelerates the "how" and the "what" of technological adoption to connect students to the educational processes; and the "why" in the pedagogical rationale for designing the student learning experience.

The recent review by Li et al. (2021) stated that students' technological approaches vary among cultures. Using the four categories of Hofstede (1983) in cultural characteristics of nations, Li and colleagues identify the differences between students' and teachers' levels of technological engagement. These four categories are students' and teachers' cultural perspectives based upon (1) power distance, (2) uncertainty avoidance, (3) individualism-collectivism, and (4) masculinity-femininity. Students from a power distance culture, for example, tend to follow teachers and do what teachers encourage them to do, including using virtual learning environment-related activities, while this might not be as likely for students from a low-level power distance culture. Another example is the case of students with low uncertainty avoidance being characterized by feeling uncomfortable facing an uncertain or unknown situation. As such, new learning and technological adoption most affected students from this culture zone. Besides the younger generations, often known as digital natives, curriculum developers should pay attention to students' digital capabilities from the low certainty avoidance culture. The AC universities might have adopted an extensive range of new practices and delivery formats in teaching and learning over a short period of time, but learners' characteristics and cultural-related elements persist. As such, for a digitally engaged program, pedagogical approaches should consider the digital competence development for all students bearing in mind the established cultural influences.

In an international classroom, students are not necessarily from a monocultural region but a mix of different backgrounds and preferences in learning and teaching. The AC universities equalize students regardless of their cultural differences in the way of "staying at home" to learn, with the absence of the physical campus. As such, technological adoption style has a direct influence on their engagement. Despite these differences, students today are no longer necessarily "just students". Often, they live and learn with their fluidity of identities, negotiating among who they are in various contexts. They can be carers, non-carers, EFL (English as First Language), ESL (English as Second Language), post-21, and the like. Each of them might have different answers to the questions:

1. How does the AC teaching and learning influence their experience?
2. What are their perspectives on technological adoption in delivering their programs?
3. Will the technological adoption in the delivery motivate or demotivate their learning?

Students migrating to the university realm, regardless of different profiles,

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personally and academically, can be compared to migrants in their ways of becoming and integrating into a new country. The capacity to adapt to new practices is directly linked to their motivation and engagement in the new learning and residing space. Successful learners at university go hand in hand with their capacity to fit into the program requirements—ways of doing, thinking, and fulfilling tasks.

Unfortunately, due to pedagogical uncertainty and curricula, AC teaching and learning practices have undermined the "ways of being a student". The social aspect of learning has been altered toward a hybrid nature, both online and face-to-face. What students might have imagined about their learning in the BC practices remains unchanged. As Barnett (2017, p. 10) suggests, in addition to "a will to learn', being a student in the 21st century is a will to engage and a preparedness to listen and explore in 'a pedagogy of strangeness". Adding to all these components of a BC world, for the AC students, the curricular concern of what to learn, how to engage with strangeness, and "the knowing, acting, and being" of a genuine education has been undermined by the interference of the uncertainty pedagogically and technologically. In addition to the ways of being and becoming AC university students, and having a sense of belonging are not only externally influenced by pedagogy, curriculum, and personal commitment but also by students' digital identities and their inclination to connect with others digitally. As such, from the BC to the AC teaching and learning practices, the expansion of technological adoption in a hybrid manner has brought along digital challenges in both pedagogical and curricular matters, directly influencing student engagement.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is one of the critical determinants of student success and positive learning experience (Zilvinskis et al., 2017; Dumford & Miller, 2018; Knobloch et al., 2018). Engaged students are reported to achieve learning satisfaction, critical thinking, and degree attainment (Webber et al., 2013; Flynn, 2014). At the institutional and national levels, student engagement is used as a metric to measure educational quality and effectiveness in surveys such as the National Student Survey in the UK (NSS) or the National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) in the US. Klem and Connell (2004, p. 35) define student engagement as "a psychological investment in the process toward learning, or understanding specifically in the areas of interest, attention, and effort students spend on the work of learning". This definition draws attention to the psychological dimension of student engagement, illuminating educators' sustaining efforts to motivate and engage students. The idea of "a psychological investment" resonates with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory referring to three basic psychological needs in terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to facilitate maximum engagement and motivation. Taking these three elements into the context of higher learning at the AC universities, this article interprets each element as below:

1. [Autonomy] The need to be an active learner—taking control of what to learn, how to learn it, and how to measure the distance between my current and desirable performance.
2. [Competence] The need to make progress and to be acknowledged for such progression.
3. [Relatedness] The need to connect to the persons, the content, and the environment.

These three elements are directly and indirectly linked to the willingness to learn. More importantly, they contribute to sustaining such willingness by incorporating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The sense of competence intrinsically relates to the self-belief in the capability to succeed, and having autonomy can empower students to take their minds beyond the fear of being right or wrong. The sense of relatedness that students develop with different members of the learning community can help nurture their capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) — navigating their worlds in the right direction.

Student-Centeredness

One pedagogical approach embracing these triangular autonomy, competence, and relatedness concerns is student-centered. According to Tangney (2014), student-centeredness is defined as centralizing students, giving them the agency to insert their ideas, and often learning-oriented. This approach directly impacts student metacognitive skills and has proved to increase student engagement and self-efficacy (Minton, 1991; Tangney, 2014). It brings into play Ryan and Deci's (2000) three elements in the psychological investment in teaching (see Figure 14.1).

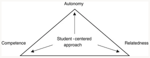

Figure 14.1 The student-centeredness inside the three psychological needs

The Destination Countries of International Student Flows are extensive, but the Distribution is Seriously Uneven
Mobility Costs and Social Networks are Primary Factors Affecting International Student Mobility
Educational Quality and Academic Reputation are Fundamental Driving Forces Affecting International Student Mobility
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However, the centrality of this approach still implies the role of the person who decides to centralize or not to centralize, or what to centralize and how to centralize. As such, the process of students' higher learning remains trapped in the binary interpretation of autonomy: to be allowed to do something or have the right to do something. Students from different cultures, as in Hofstede's (1983) categories, might react differently to the distributed classroom power in student-centeredness. In AC universities, student-centeredness is more difficult with unplanned changes in the education process (Varga-Adams et al., 2021). Both students and teachers did not expect and plan for changes of such scope in their practice. The newness and uncertainty of the entire protocol of (1) student-to-teacher, (2) student-to-student, and (3) student-to-material interactions requires unplanned adaption. This new protocol partially undermines the core of AC universities' learning and teaching activities. However, a new set of rules and principles is required to engage students via a student-oriented pedagogy.

Either in the BC or AC universities, the student-centered approach is criticized for the fact that it gives students so much freedom. Students might not know what to do with the pedagogical freedom and associate their formal curriculum in the same way as YouTube videos or Spotify podcasts. In other words, giving students so much freedom is closely linked to the pitfall of losing the connection from the educator's side. For the AC students, the over-freedom also means the puzzlement of what to do with this freedom when the constancy of a learning environment is no longer physically there for them to turn to.

In the formal education space, like university-related programs, learning is structured in a way to train a set of specific skills rather than a mere provision of the endless fascination of knowledge, discovery, and liberation. The autonomy or the freedom granted to students, either in student-centeredness or in other novel teaching methods, is a conditional or limited freedom. To be accurate, such autonomy is considered structured freedom, the freedom which is structurally granted for learners to achieve their learning target and graduate. Still, higher education is higher education; in a way, as Barnett's (1990) argument, what makes higher learning higher is the open-ended relationship between students and knowledge. Such open-ended nature allows students to insert themselves to create and interpret realities, theories, and knowledge in their unique ways. It also implies the multiple interests students can develop while studying and become independent learners who receive structured guidance from their educators. These interests should not only be molded into the curriculum but celebrated in a student-centered approach. The hybrid offering mode (online and on-campus) in the AC world requires a new layer for such structured freedom. On the one hand, freedom should remain freedom, particularly maintaining the higher in higher learning; on the other hand, the structured factor requires the new pedagogical concern of embracing the high level of virtual engagement when the physicality of the learning place is no longer something taken for granted. The virtuality of the learning space in the AC practice also creates a new pitfall of freedom and engagement—whether freedom undermines engagement or engagement takes away freedom.

Active Learning

In addition to student-centeredness, another pedagogical approach incorporating Ryan and Deci's (2000) psychological investment is the active learning framework (Chi, 2009). In this framework, Chi (2009) proposes three types of active learning, including active, constructive, and interactive activities within the classroom to engage students.

- Active: Do something, often physical
- Constructive: Produce output beyond given information, discovery learning
- Interactive: Dialogue with other students or teacher

Chi (2009) distinguishes the differences between active, constructive, and interactive elements in learning activities. These learning activities could be about doing something (*active*), producing learning outputs and new ideas (*constructive*), and initiating dialogue (*interactive*) refers to the dialogue. With the active element, learning activities are engagement oriented, such as identifying, paraphrasing, and repeating certain elements of students' prior knowledge. The constructive elements raise the learning activities at a higher level where students are involved in self-constructed activities, for example, explaining concepts, planning, and predicting outcomes. Unlike the active elements, the constructive requires students to create individually by connecting to their prior knowledge. Finally, the interactive element is considered by Chi (2009) as the highest level of active learning, where students create or participate in the instructional dialogue to create something new together or finish certain areas of their curriculum; examples can be revising errors from feedback.

Like student-centeredness, an active learning framework generates a positive learning experience where students can critically engage in authentic activities (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Wiggins et al., 2016). Using the examples from my practice in teaching Pre-sessional English for Academic Programmes (PEAP), this article links three fundamental psychological needs of students (autonomy, competence, relatedness) to the student-centeredness and active learning framework via the examples of student-bubble workshops where students were granted the choice and freedom to personalize their curriculum content. Examples of these workshops will be looked at in greater detail later.

International Students in the Pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes Programmes (PEAP)

In administrative terms, the definition of international students in the UK by UUKI (Universities UK International) is "someone who is not domiciled in the UK but resides temporarily in the UK to study" (Kieu, 2021, p. 136). International students contribute significantly to the UK economy each year, with about £20.3 billion in 2015–2016 (HEPI, 2018), generating income for research, higher education institutions, and residents and adding diversity and richness to UK universities and communities. However, their economic importance tends to overshadow the recognition that they deserve.

Like other student cohorts, the capacity to fit in goes hand in hand with a successful learning experience for international students. However, unlike different student cohorts, international students whose English is their second language (ESL), such requirement is closely linked to their language capacity or English capacity. In the Anglo-American academic environment, the newness of concepts, practice, and frames of thought can single out some students. In this case, English is not just a means of communication but links to the inner perception of self, engagement, and belief in their chance to succeed (self-efficacy). For ESL international students, learning goes beyond nationalism but inhabits cultural and linguistic differences; particularly, learning becomes cosmopolitanism (Rizvi, 2009). Students will learn from these differences and develop comparative views of the learning matter. For students whose English requirement is not up to the standard, the Pre-sessional Academic English programs (PEAP) and the intensive academic English courses are designed to give ESL international students another opportunity to fulfill the entry-level requirement (obtaining unconditional offers). These programs are the first formal educational spaces for international students at UK universities. The PEAP is characterized by its intensiveness and density of content allocation to deliver this requirement. At the PEAP at Midlands Russell Group University (a public research university in Nottingham, England), the courses are categorized into four-week, six-week, and ten-week courses. Students' progression is measured against three criteria: genre, criticality, and language.

- Genre requirements are associated with academic convention (e.g., referencing, quoting, paraphrasing, synthesizing);
- Criticality is associated with the quality of thinking (e.g., evaluating sources, pushing the argument further, questioning and suspecting claims);
- Language is based on academic English-related requirements (e.g., structuring and expressing grammar and lexis).

Imagine learning all these within the span of four to ten weeks for first-time international students in the UK. Imagine being somebody who only uses English as a subject at school or university (learning grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and now sitting to fulfill all these requirements within such time? Will there also be a space for the student-centered approach and active learning to deliver all these criteria within a limited time? How can the tutor maintain the balance between delivering the course curriculum to help students fulfill their assessment tasks and evidence of having met the learning outcomes while nurturing engagement and academic enjoyment? Do tutors need to compromise the former for the latter or vice versa? Does one aspect take precedence over another, and the engagement gets squeezed out, or should they be inextricably linked? With the AC practices, how will the teaching, learning, and engaging paradigm shift for these ESL first-time international students?

Personalizing Curricular Content

Under the generic curriculum of Academic English in these pre-sessional programs, each student might develop a preference for specific content and personal engagement, which enhances learning. Within one group, some students might be more familiar and comfortable with one curricular content area than others. As such, to bring out the social aspect of learning, giving students chances to peer support one another might bring psychological satisfaction in terms of the need to take control (autonomy), to be acknowledged (competence), and to belong and connect with others (relatedness). One way to do so is to let students personalize their curricular content. Using the COVID-19 lockdown language teaching in 2020 in the UK in one HEI, setting up a studying bubble is one way to bestow students the academic freedom to take control of their learning, and teach each other. This idea originated from my practice at the pre-sessional Academic English course at a Midlands Russell Group University,[1] which has proved its pedagogical advantage in my class in (1) bringing students together (Ryan and Deci's relatedness and Chi's constructive and interactive), (2) letting students exercise their structured curriculum freedom (Chi's interactive—integrating new and old knowledge within and across bubbles), and (3) exercising the sense of competence intellectually and socially (Ryan and Deci's competence and student-centeredness). Students can choose their study content based on the suggestive essential readings or coursework content constructed in their bubbles. Each bubble can organize its team in task allocation (e.g., what to read, by when). Seminars and workshops can

be run in a cross-bubble and student-led format, particularly cross-teaching among student study bubbles. The bubble practice runs with the underlying principle of student autonomy, and active learning to (1) give the student a choice of what they want to learn; (2) let them actively construct and deliver their chosen content to the group.

This practice is a combination of in-bubble and cross-bubble activities. There will be a session for all students to come to terms with their bubbles' regulations and expectations for running these activities. The tutor's role is to facilitate and suggest alternative practices if needed. Based on Chi's (2009) framework of three active learning types (see below), the nature of these in-bubble and cross-bubble activities is allocated as

- In-bubble: active and constructive
- Cross-bubble: interactive

In the summer of 2020, I ran the bubble format with the PEAP students within a five-week course. My class was divided into three bubbles (nine students in total), with three self-selected members among the students as leaders. The bubble self-selection method might work well with a group of students who are familiar with one another. However, students of this group formation style tend to spend more time socializing than working. As such, the better-chosen option is the tutor-assigned grouping to maximize group diversity and performance. Following the bubble formation, a series of four cross-bubble sessions were run based on Jonson's (2005) K-W-L technique. Please see Tables 14.1 and 14.2.

- K: What I know
- W: What I want to know
- L: What I have learned

Within five weeks, the cross-bubble workshop ranged from *How to present yourself academically* to *Academic writing*, where students creatively inserted their approaches and interpretation of the curricular content.

Table 14.1 Example of a bubble's K-W-L approach

Academic writing—preparing for the position analysis paper			
Bubble 1	K What I know	W What I want to know	L What I have learned
Zhang, Nasime, Van (pseudo names)	My title, argument, position	– Search for sources– Cite my sources– Evaluate my sources– Building a *good* paragraph	– Empirical, logical, anecdotal evidence– Referencing styles– What's good, what's bad, and what's relevant

Table 14.2 Four steps of the bubble practice

Step 1 Forming the Bubbles	*Complete the K-W-L*	*Justify for the W*	*Members to get to know each other*
Step 2 Preparing for the cross-Bubble workshops	Bubbles - forming a cross-Bubble workshop agenda: content, time, activities	Bubbles– agreeing on "ground rules": e.g., speak like an expert, be confident.	Tutor – Briefing on thinking behavior questions (Goulding, 2018) (clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, fairness, significance) for questions and answers purposes
Step 3 Running the cross-Bubble workshop – 20 minutes + questions and answers	Tutor Allocating of tasks: which bubble to deliver the content, which bubble to ask which questions (e.g., Bubble to ask What, Why, How, Otherwise questions)		
Step 4 Reflecting on "This is what we have learned"	Connecting the dots: other bubbles: how this related to your prior knowledge	Internalising the matter: how this personally related to your learning experience	Future-orienting: will this matter still be relevant in your lifelong learning journey?

Student Evaluation and Tutor Reflections

During a five-week PEAP course in 2020, students noted the following positive feedback:

- I've never spoken that much English before. It was different!
- I thought pre-recording the sessions would be less risky, but it was good to gain confidence and 'teach' each other on Teams.
- I was confused at first, but after we met with our bubble members online, we knew what to do, and we enjoyed it.
- After leading a session, I feel very confident.
- Quite empowered because everyone was so attentive and professional.
- I thought we were left on our own, but it was fun when we came up with something from the group.

From a tutor's perspective, this Bubble teaching has brought to life the novelty of student teachers—their interpretation of the teaching method. It also allows tutors to position themselves as an observer within their classroom and critically reflect on how they teach and how their students learn. However, this Bubble teaching could have been more engaging if the tutor 'had known' the students more. By actually "knowing" each student, the tutor could give them personalizing feedback and encouragement fitting

into their areas needing improvement. Moreover, the structured freedom should have been carefully planned as there would always be a pitfall of students “being lost in translation”. For example, in hindsight, instead of letting students decide their K-W-L, the tutor could also have prepared the guided materials, including PowerPoint slides, for students to use or adapt in their initial cross-bubble sessions.

Unlike the approach where students see the curriculum as a singular format, the personalizing curriculum in this bubble approach enables students to construct their plural format of what a curriculum *should be* or their “ought to” curricula and deliver them to their peers. By giving students the right to create and teach what they have learned, we will be surprised by the plurality and newness of their intellect and contributions, particularly with international students whose languages, contexts, and experiences are rarely explored. The K-W-L practice enables students to connect the dots: where they come from and what they are doing now, which boosted the confidence of international students. By finishing the Pre-sessional EAP courses, they would not feel that they were starting their journeys empty-handedly but equipped by the K—their prior knowledge, practice, and competence that they have been enriched throughout their holistic education journey, regardless of their home country or in the UK.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed student engagement in the uncertainty of the AC universities where the question of how to teach (pedagogical concerns) has been undermined socially and pedagogically. To engage students, understanding their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential, but embracing all these factors into a practical pedagogy takes work. Giving students either too little or too much freedom might cause need frustration leading to disengagement and demotivation (Jang et al., 2016). This chapter proposed one way to tap into the psychological needs and engage students by giving them structured freedom, particularly by combining the student-centered approach and active learning framework where student autonomy is structurally granted in a flexible pedagogy. To demonstrate this structured freedom, a case of personalizing curricular content for ESL international students in the Pre-sessional Academic English program was provided. This example was taken from my deliberative pedagogical space for students to channel their prior knowledge and experience fitting into our curriculum. When English is not the mother tongue, the open-ended relationship between ESL international students and knowledge is undermined linguistically and intellectually. In many cases, limited English capacity is quickly associated with limited intellectual capacity, which needs to be corrected. Teaching international students academic English is not just about stuffing students with a new language and academic convention (content-oriented) but also about being voice-valuing (student-centered).

Finally, for lecturers and students, teaching and learning are professions of the not-yetness. Whether the place of learning is online or on campus, the physicality of learning and the community’s intellectuality are the places to nurture capacities to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) and enrich the pool of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) for students. Having the agency take greater control of their learning is my suggestion to increase student engagement in the AC universities.

Note

1 The Russell Group comprises 24 research-intensive UK universities with a shared commitment and focus towards research and providing an outstanding teaching and learning experience.

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