

# Preface

Over the last 30 years or so, *student engagement* has become an all-round good thing in higher education. A very large and far-reaching research literature has inspired claims for its great value as an enabler of learning. These include that student engagement encourages persistence, assures quality learning, enables success, prepares graduates for the job market and helps them as active citizens to individual and social well-being. This literature offers many practical, yet varied, ideas for teachers in higher education to implement in their classrooms. The sheer number and diversity of ideas about engagement have led me to ask the following questions which inspire and organize this book.

- How can the rich and diverse engagement research be synthesized into useful strategies for use by higher education teachers to improve learning and teaching?
- Why have the outputs from this complex and varied body of work become a standard bearer for improving learning and teaching in higher education?
- What is missing from engagement research and how can this be addressed?

As a teacher of adults in undergraduate and postgraduate education, I have always wanted to become a more effective enabler of learning. The student engagement literature came to my notice while colleagues and I were researching student retention and persistence in a funded project. As it became clearer that student engagement and persistence are connected, I transferred my research attention toward engagement. This has been the focus of my work over the last decade and gave rise to the first question about organizing the book which is addressed in Chaps. 1–3. The second question emerged when I became intrigued by the reasons engagement was so popular. I was struck by the way engagement research seemed to focus on practical ‘how to’ questions while skimming more lightly over ‘why’ questions. With a background in politics and history I became aware that student engagement research and practice flourished in a political and economic climate dominated by neoliberalism, a way of thinking that forms the

dominant mainstream of ideas in higher education today. This question is discussed in Chaps. 4–6. The third question followed because my response to the second question suggested that there was more to student engagement than has been aired in the engagement literature. Chapters 7–11 argue that ideas from critical theory could supplement what is missing in mainstream student education praxis.

Each of my original questions gave rise to a tentative answer. These in turn generated three propositions which underpin the argument in the book. The propositions are:

- There is a mainstream view of student engagement that makes a considerable contribution to understanding what works in learning and teaching in higher education to enable students to achieve success in a quality focused learning environment. This proposition draws heavily on articles I published with research partners from a funded Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) project in New Zealand. These publications are listed in Appendix B.
- Student engagement research has achieved its importance in higher education at a time when dominant neoliberal political ideas and practices aligned with mainstream engagement research. While not caused by neoliberalism, student engagement has an elective affinity with it. This limits its potential. This proposition owes much to independent research I did between 2000 and 2015. Relevant publications in forming Chaps. 4–6 are listed in the Appendix.
- To reach its potential, student engagement needs to develop another dimension in research and practice. This dimension moves it away from neoliberal thinking and towards enabling learners to engage in a holistic, critical way in order to work for greater social justice. This proposition is supported by work I published between 2013 and 2015.

While the book does mine mainstream engagement research for practical ways to improve learning in higher education, this is not intended as a *how to do engagement* book. It rejects the notion that learning in classrooms is somehow divorced from the world of politics. Instead the book recognizes the symbiotic relationship between education and politics. Dominant ideas about learning and teaching such as those about student engagement are produced and supported within a congenial political climate. Consequently, this book is a work of critical scholarship. It values mainstream engagement research but also critiques its accepted understandings as limiting. This critique results in fresh insights about student engagement in higher education. It employs ideas from critical theory to develop a more holistic view of student engagement; one that distances it from the influence of neoliberal ideas and policies. The book is designed primarily for teachers and postgraduate students in higher education who wish to develop their own engagement pedagogy without being captured by its affinity with neoliberalism. It will also appeal to readers interested in critical analyses of education that seek to find ways to achieve a fairer society.

This preface hints at but does not acknowledge explicitly my own viewpoints. To discuss them at length would undoubtedly be extremely boring. However, you

are entitled to know where I generally stand on topics addressed in the book. As a teacher, I see myself as problem poser and enabler of learning rather than as a transmitter of knowledge; as a learner I find myself to be a questioner rather than a believer in received truths; as a theorist I am of a critical disposition and as a citizen I am firmly aligned to the left of centre in politics and opposed to neoliberalism.

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