***How do student-teacher relationships engage or alienate students in higher education?***

*Samuel Asare, Helen Nicholson*

*University of Otago, New Zealand;* [*samuel.asare@postgrad.otago.ac.nz*](mailto:samuel.asare@postgrad.otago.ac.nz)*;* [*helen.nicholson@otago.ac.nz*](mailto:helen.nicholson@otago.ac.nz)

*Sarah Stein*

*University of Otago, New Zealand;* [*sarah.stein@otago.ac.nz*](mailto:sarah.stein@otago.ac.nz)

**Abstract**

Student learning has attracted a lot of interest from higher education practitioners and researchers mainly due to the benefits that result from high quality learning. A number of theoretical frameworks have been and are being proposed from diverse disciplines to understand and improve student learning. One of such frameworks argues for students’ learning in higher education to be conceptualised as consisting of engaging and alienating experiences and that teachers are key among the various factors that lead to these learning experiences. This paper explores how teachers and students perceive and interact with each other can either engage or alienate students.

The paper reports on part of a doctoral research project that employs an embedded case study design to explore undergraduate students’ perceptions of factors that influence their engagement in a public university in Ghana. Data were collected from three sources: survey, diaries and interviews. The survey included 469 Humanities students selected from main campus, city campus and distance learning across all year levels by quota sampling. Of the 469 students surveyed, 225 agreed to keep a diary of their learning experiences for two days and participate in a one-to-one interview. Due to time and resource constraints, purposive sampling was used to select 17 students for diaries and interviews by considering gender, level of study, mode of study and availability of respondents. This ensured that data were collected from a wide range of perspectives.

The analysis was in two forms. First, survey data were analysed with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to find percentages and means of the responses. In addition, ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) and t-tests were conducted to find relationships between and among variables. Second, data from diaries and interviews were analysed using the general inductive approach to develop themes relating to student-teacher relationships.

The results suggest that engaging or alienating experiences may result from teacher behaviours: respect, availability, and a show of authority. Students may work harder when they perceive teachers to be caring and supportive of their learning. On the other hand, the use of negative language and teacher unapproachability may demotivate students and cause alienating experiences. The results of the study so far show that teacher behaviours in and out of class may contribute to students’ engagement and alienation in higher education. It broadens understanding of student learning as consisting of engaging and alienating experiences and may assist teachers to reflect on their practice to enhance student learning.

**Keywords**

Engagement. Alienation. Higher education. Student-teacher relationships.

# Introduction

Student learning has attracted a lot of interest from higher education stakeholders over the last few decades. Scholars have presented views on aspects of learning that require more attention. Some have argued for the development of skills and intellect which address the current economic discourse. However, there is increasing concern among scholars that higher education is losing sight of its intrinsic purpose which is playing an important part in developing the whole person or ensuring “human flourishing” (Case, 2016, p. 2). In her think piece, Case (2016) argues that notwithstanding the importance of higher education in addressing economic problems of society, it should not take over its intrinsic purpose.

In order to help students to develop the whole person, teachers may need something more than skills and knowledge of a subject. A caring relationship that ensures that students are genuinely supported to learn has been identified as an important aspect of teaching (Velasquez, West, Graham & Osguthorpe, 2013). This paper argues that how teachers and students perceive and interact with each other can either engage or alienate undergraduate students.

# Related Research

A number of conceptions and theories of learning have been and are being developed from diverse disciplines to understand and improve student learning (Jarvis, 2009). Building on the available theories, particularly approaches to learning, Mann (2001) argued for student learning to be conceptualised as consisting of *engaging* and *alienating* experiences. Very few studies have applied *engagement* and *alienation* as a theoretical framework (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Case, 2007, 2008; Barnhadt & Ginns, 2014). This framework can account for the sociocultural context in learning which is missing in the more widely applied approaches to learning perspective (Case & Gunstone, 2005; Case, 2008).

Alienation is understood in this paper as “the state of experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong” (Mann, 2001, p. 8), rather than the “*connection* in the context of a relationship which a student desires or expects to belong to” (Case, 2007, p. 120, emphasis in original). Bryson and Hand (2007) posit that alienation, which they called disengagement, is a polar opposite of engagement. It lies on the extreme end of a continuum, opposite to engagement.

The literature on learning suggests that the nature of student-teacher relationships affects the quality of learning. For example, students’ perceptions of teacher approachability can be influenced by teachers’ use of threats or encouragement (Ishiyama & Hartlanb, 2002), resulting in students being less likely to seek help from such teachers. Likewise, the kind of words teachers use can have alienating or engaging impact on students: negative words may cause alienating experience and positive supportive words may support engagement (Ambrose et al, 2010; Covell, McNeil & Howe, 2009). Students develop better understanding when they have more opportunities to interact with teachers and peers (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Overall, supportive relationships between teachers and students have been shown to lead students to attempt new things and to put more effort into learning (Cambourne, 1988). When the classroom environment is supportive, students find better opportunities to speak openly and feel encouraged to participate meaningfully in the learning process (Bafile, 2005; Meyer & Turner, 2006).

## Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Engaging experiences

Teacher behaviour

Student-teacher relationships

Student behaviour Alienating experiences

# The Current Study

This paper forms part of a larger project focusing on undergraduate students’ perceptions of factors that influence their engagement in higher education. It uses an embedded case study design (Yin, 2009) to develop a broad and more in-depth understanding of how teachers and students perceive and interact with each other may engage or alienate undergraduate students in a large public university in Ghana.

Data were collected from three sources: survey, diaries and interviews. The survey included 469 Humanities students selected from main campus, city campus and distance learning across all study levels by quota sampling (Newby, 2010). The student-teacher ratio of the Humanities is 58:1 (Atuahene, 2013) which is far above the 18:1 standard by the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE, 2013). Of the 469 students surveyed, 225 agreed to keep a diary of their learning experiences for two days and participate in a one-to-one interview. Due to time and resource constraints, purposive sampling (Yin, 2009) was used to select 17 students for diaries and interviews by considering gender, level of study, mode of study and availability of respondents. This ensured that data were collected from a wide range of perspectives.

Data analysis was in two forms. First, survey data were analysed with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to find percentages and means of the responses. In addition, ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) and t-tests were conducted to find relationships between and among variables. Second, data from diaries and interviews were analysed using the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to develop themes relating to student-teacher- relationships.

# Findings and Discussion

A little over half of the participants (54%) were males with females comprising (46%). 45% were studying at the main campus, with city campus and distance learning having similar number of participants. The majority of the participants were young adults aged between 21 and 30 (69%), with those aged over 30 constituting less than (5%).

Overall, the research showed that engaging or alienating experiences may result from teacher behaviours: respect, availability, and a show of authority.

## A sense of respect from teachers

Participants were asked whether teachers valuing their views was important to their learning. The majority (88%) thought teachers valuing their views produced engaging experiences. Further probing through interviews suggested that students attended class and learned well when teachers were warm and friendly.

He establishes that rapport with students where students would like to attend his class. Outside class, he has a personal relationship with students which is so appealing that you always want to study his course.

You feel very comfortable in class and you will be able to ask questions. It makes you pay attention because you feel the teacher is looking at you*.*

Data from students’ interviews and diaries suggested that demeaning or belittling comments from teachers lead to alienating experiences.

I asked the teacher a question and he said my friend, sit down you are wrong and asked me which secondary school I attended. I felt very embarrassed and decided not to talk in class again.

The finding corroborates Covell et al. (2009) who found that a respectful relationship was important for engagement. Respectful relationships may boost students’ confidence which will motivate them to attend and participate actively in class. Through sharing of ideas by asking and answering questions, students’ ideas are challenged. This helps them to reflect and alter their views for better understanding.

## Teacher availability

Overall participants indicated that teachers’ availability to discuss their learning enhanced their experiences (88%). This perception was corroborated by students’ interview.

You can go to them and they will clarify things for you. That one is even better because you get one-on-one interaction which helps you to understand things better.

In spite of the general agreement that teacher availability was important for students, when participants were asked how well teachers made themselves available to discuss their learning, (37%) gave a poor rating. A possible reason for the poor rating was suggested.

You go to the office during office hours to see a teacher and it’s like hey my friend, I am busy go away. That kind of open arms and welcoming gesture is not there.

This finding is supported by the literature which suggests that learning is enhanced when students get more opportunities to discuss their learning with teachers (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Kuh & Hu, 2001). When teachers make themselves available to discuss students’ learning, they can provide further explanation to help students to understand the subject. In the era of large classes, students may not have the opportunity to ask questions or express their views during lectures. This means students, especially shy ones, would like to have one-on-one discussion with the teacher for further clarification. The interactions may help teachers to identify the needs of students in order to provide the right assistance.

## A show of authority

Most participants in the interviews and diaries felt that an unfriendly learning environment characterized by a show of power by a teacher may intimidate students and cause alienating experiences.

The first thing he said at our first lecture was “the previous students thought I was only going to bring theories in the semester exams for them to explain. I surprised them with calculation questions and almost all of them failed”. So you are scared from the onset.

When he comes to class, everyone is too quiet. Everyone is in a cage sort of. I don’t know if you get me. You feel like there is CCTV on you so be there. You feel that he is going to say something embarrassing for your colleagues to laugh at you.

The findings suggest a tense and intimidating learning environment which previous studies have found to have the potential to cause alienating experiences (Meyer & Turner, 2006). When students are unable to express their views as a result of fear, it may hinder learning as learning is enhanced through sharing of ideas. In the context of Ghana, where teachers are mostly addressed by titles, the imbalance of power relationship between students and teachers may be very visible. This could make it difficult for students to establish warm and friendly relationship with teachers.

# Conclusion

The study suggests that teacher behaviours in and out of class contribute to students’ engagement and alienation in higher education. Teachers’ behaviours that were identified were respect, availability and a show of authority.

The study has implications for theory as it supports Mann’s (2001) argument to focus on *alienation* and *engagement* in order to highlight important social context factors not generally drawn out in other ways of examining engagement. The results broaden understanding of student learning as consisting of engaging and alienating experiences.

The study also has implications for university teachers and students themselves. Teachers should not assume that having the skills and knowledge of a subject is enough to help students to learn. The nature of the relationships between themselves and students has a lot of influence on how well students learn. Students may work harder when they perceive teachers to be caring and supportive of their learning. On the other hand, the use of negative words and teacher unapproachability may demotivate students and cause alienating experiences.

In addition, the study has implications for future research which could investigate teachers’ views about how student-teacher relationships may cause engaging or alienating experiences in higher education.

Even though the findings support studies than elsewhere, caution must be exercised before generalising the findings because it is context specific. The views of the participants cannot be said to represent all of the students of the university in which the study was conducted.

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