

Conversations with Ella Kahu

Part 3: Practices that Foster Engagement

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Abstract

This special issue of *Student Success* celebrates the work of Professor Ella Kahu and her substantial contribution to the advancement of our collective understanding of student engagement. In June 2024 Professors Karen Nelson and Chi Baik, and Dr Cat Picton sat down with Ella for a reflective conversation about her work, and additional insights in her theorising and research on student experience and engagement. In this special issue, we present the interview transcript in three parts and showcase Ella's key publications.

The publications discussed in this section explore innovative practices that promote engagement. From the exploration of student interest as a key driver for first-year students in a regional Australian university to the critical role of tutor-student relationships, these publications shed light on the various elements that contribute to a vibrant and engaging educational experience. The integration of communication tools such as Discord and Teams alongside traditional learning management systems like Moodle demonstrates the evolving nature of student interaction and community building in both face-to-face and online environments. In addition, the incorporation of personal experiences in critical reading and writing pedagogies highlights the importance of connecting academic content with students' lives. Together, these publications offer a range of strategies that educators and institutions can employ to cultivate an engaging and supportive educational environment that support student learning across diverse contexts.

Ella, your articles talk about both direct and indirect engagement. Can you explain those concepts?

You can engage a student, as in trigger behavioural, emotional, or cognitive engagement really directly. A passionate teacher will fire interest and enthusiasm – emotional engagement in their students. I should never say 'will'. I should always say might or could, because there are so many variables influencing engagement that there's no guarantee of anything. You can trigger behavioural engagement by giving really clear outlines of what the student needs to do, and how much time they should spend, and what they should read – guiding them on how to behave.

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But the pathways highlight that there are other things that we do that will also foster engagement. If you, as a tutor, give feedback on the student's piece of work that actually builds their self-efficacy as opposed to just telling them that they're right or wrong, it gives the student the message that it's not that they didn't try hard enough, it's that if they work harder, and if they implement the feedback, and think about it in a different way, then next time they'll be able to do it.

If you give feed-forward, not feed-back, it boosts their self-efficacy. When they've got that boosted self-efficacy, they feel more capable. If you feel more capable about a task, you're much more likely to do it, and do it with a higher level of enthusiasm. That's true of all those pathways. When a student comes to you with stress in their lives, or they need an extension because whatever's happened, if you respond with empathy and kindness and warmth, the student's wellbeing is likely to improve, and that makes it easier for them to engage with their studies because they feel cared about.

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Teaching is an influence on engagement in the framework. What are your reflections of your own teaching, and the teaching of others?

In my teaching, I believe it is the teacher presence, that relationship that you build with your students, that is critical. You can't build a relationship with 300 students. You can only build the impression of a relationship, and you do that by teaching presence – being there, really being there, bringing your passion, your enthusiasm for learning to the classroom; reacting to students individually with empathy.

I do most of my teaching online and, interestingly, I find it easier to build relationships with my students online than in the classroom. Most people are surprised when I say that. When I teach face to face, I'm a lecturer standing in front of 300 or 400 people in a lecture hall. I can't name them because they're a bunch of faces out there. When I'm online, I've still got 300 or 400 people, but everyone's got their name next to every interaction they have with me. More importantly, what the students get online, if it's done well, is a much greater sense of me. So, for example, when I'm teaching, one of the things I do – and I'm sure most online teachers do this – I record a weekly video for my students. I record it fresh, even though I was teaching the same course both semesters. People would always say to me 'well, that's a waste of time. Why don't you just do a nice, polished, professional one in the studio, and then you don't have to redo it?' I'm like 'because it's personal'. When I do it, I want to be able to say 'and that question that Aroha raised in the forum is really relevant to the stuff we're learning today'. If I prerecorded it, I don't get to do that. So they get a sense of my relationship with other people as well. Everything I do when I teach is deliberately casual – that's not quite the right word – approachable? The idea of approachability is really important. Whether you're online or in class, that really does mean being a person – not a stuffy academic who comes in and presents as an expert or whatever.

The anecdote that I love to share is when I was travelling around Australia a couple of years ago, and I was in a little town outside of Perth. As I walked to the shop, this woman who was about 20 metres away from me, went 'oh my god, what are you doing here?' I don't really know anyone in Western Australia, so I assumed she wasn't talking to me. I kind of looked over my shoulder, and she was looking straight at me. Then she went on 'I did your course'. She had done my course two or three years

ago, and she recognised me instantly, and she recognised me warmly enough and individually enough to come bouncing up to me, going, ‘ah, wow, it’s so neat to see you’.

In the research we did with first year on-campus students, the impact that tutors have on student engagement came out really strongly. And not just the teaching time. But the tutors were not paid any hours at all outside of their immediate contact time to do the more pastoral, more extended support. They were doing it anyway because they’re caring people who want to help their students. We all know how many temporary contracts there are in universities and how short-term they are. Tutors are paid one hour to prep the tutorial, and one hour for the tutorial. What about the half an hour after class where three people want to come and talk to them about something to do with their discipline, or something much wider than the actual class? We don’t fund that kind of thing.

A trend in universities now is this growing awareness of professional staff around the importance of fostering engagement and curating the student experience. At the same time, sometimes we see a shift where academic colleagues have less responsibility for the broader student experience. What advice do you have for us about how to navigate that?

I always find universities fascinating because of this whole academic and professional staff divide. I see it in so many places where it’s almost like the academics are huddled over there criticising the professional staff, and the professional staff are over there criticising the academic staff. Neither one thinks the other is doing what they should be doing. A shared conversation is needed, and a recognition they are there for the same reason, and neither can do their jobs without the other. All three of us – academics, support teams, and students – have roles to play, so let’s be more open about that.

We need to articulate a shared goal. All the support services in the world are not going to do anything if you haven’t got an academic teaching a discipline subject in the classroom. And the academic really cannot do everything the student needs in the three or four hours a week that they have them. They need someone else to support the wellbeing, to help foster the belonging, to teach them how to write, to give them careers advice when their academic belonging is shaky.

Support services have a role in engaging students, and they also have a role in helping academics see how student services support the work of engaging students – not just making them feel nice but actually engaging them. I’m going to add in here that students need to understand what’s happening to engage them and what influences their engagement. The students themselves need to understand something like the framework to understand their role.

I was on a panel about orientation at my own university. I was like, think about people. How does a sausage sizzle at the beginning of the semester help the student engage? It doesn’t. It gives them a sausage and makes them feel nice. Give them a sausage while talking to them about business studies or while introducing them to a fellow of business, make meaning out of the experience of university but don’t just give them the sausage.

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There’s a lot of talk about disengagement, and the problem that we’re seeing in universities with students not showing up as an indicator of quite serious disengagement. Can you speak to that?

The thing that first came to my mind when you said that was that it makes the classic mistake of assuming that behavioural engagement is the only important dimension of engagement. A student not showing up doesn’t mean they’re not engaged. It means they’re not engaged with your lecture, which might say something about your lecture [laughs]. But through COVID, I think, students learnt that you don’t have to sit in a classroom to learn. For some, I think, that’s been really valuable and really freeing. It’s allowed them to use their time to foster their own ways of learning. Some students will be reading the materials that you’re providing them. They may be watching recorded materials. They will be doing work.

But I think there is another group of students who have seen this as a reason to not bother going to university, as in, physically going. I think that speaks probably to a lack of understanding about what university is about, and their motivation for being there. There is a fairly large cohort of students who come to university to get a qualification, full stop, not to learn. Well, you have to do a bit of learning. I remember saying to my first-year students, you're here for two reasons. One is to get the qualification, and the other is to learn.

You don't have to go to a lecture to do the assessment task. I see students who focus entirely on assessments, which is part of what not coming to lectures is about. In their mind, two hours saved by not going to the lecture is two hours they can put on their assessments and get better grades. That makes me so sad because they are missing out on so much other learning that's not being directly assessed.

I hate the fact that we have to design assessments to make students do things, like, they won't read it unless you assess it, kind of thing. I think that speaks to really complex issues around the purpose of university and the deeper problems around society. Quite frankly, that the only things you do that matter are the ones that earn you money, which means you get the assessments, get the qualification, get out the door, as opposed to sitting here and embracing the incredible opportunities that being at a university offers.

What advice would you give doctoral students who are embarking on higher education research?

When I was doing my PhD, I decided to do a thesis with publications rather than the more traditional manuscript thesis. I think this is a really critical thing. If I could give one word of advice to doctoral students, it would be: publish as you go. That framework article was published online in 2011, the year I started my PhD. By 2012, people were citing it, much to my absolute astonishment.

I didn't have to go back at the end of my PhD, and churn out articles, which by then would've been four years old, and the whole literature would've moved on. I had my foot in the field right at the beginning of my PhD. That was a huge benefit to me, but it also changed how I did my lit review, because I wasn't writing a lit review; I was writing an article. In writing an article, rather than a lit review, what I came to understand with my supervisors is that you have to make it much more meaty. It meant that I was building on a really strong foundation.

What advice do you have for colleagues, other higher education staff, who want to pursue research?

While I think making a contribution is important, I also think taking something that someone else has done and using it or applying it is important. As researchers, we are building on what's gone before. There is a quote: 'standing on the shoulders of giants'. But I think we're not always building upwards. We are sometimes building around, like, going a little bit sideways, going a little bit deeper, taking an idea and applying it in a different context or with a different group of students. The whole point of the framework is that students are different, whether they're young versus old, whether they're straight from school or not, whether they're online or not.

I come from a psychology background, which does a lot of experimental, traditional research methods, and it's founded on the principle that just because you found that once doesn't mean it's true. A philosophy of research is that it has to be replicable and we need to do it again and again to build on it. There's so many cohorts of students, and we need to know more about all of them.

The student experience is set within a sociopolitical cultural experience. So you can do the same study in Australia and then in New Zealand and then the UK or China, and you are going to get new information, and that is making a contribution. So, yes, you need to make a contribution, but you don't always have to do something incredibly innovative. I think sometimes, especially in qualitative work, adding diverse student voices to the mix of what we know enriches our body of knowledge.

Publications

Journal articles:

Heinrich, E., Thomas, H., & Kahu, E. R. (2022). An exploration of course and cohort communication spaces in Discord, Teams, and Moodle. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(6), 107–120. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.7633>

Kahu, E. R., & Gerrard, H. (2018). The use of personal experience as a strategy for critical reading and writing. A practice report. *Student Success*, 9(3), 71-77. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v9i3.470>

Kahu, E. R., Nelson, K., & Picton, C. (2017). Student interest as a key driver of engagement for first year students. *Student Success*, 8(2), 55-66. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.379>

Kahu, E. R., & Picton, C. (2019). The benefits of good tutor-student relationships in the first year. *Student Success*, 10(2), 23-33. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v10i2.1293>

Kahu, E. R., Thomas, H. G., & Heinrich, E. (2022). “A sense of community and camaraderie”: Increasing student engagement by supplementing an LMS with a Learning Commons Communication Tool. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 25(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14697874221127691>

Book chapters:

Kahu, E. R. (2023). Fostering student engagement: The importance of relationships and belonging face-to-face and online. In Baik, C & Kahu, E. (Eds.) *Research handbook on the student experience in higher education* pp. 58-73 <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802204193.00012>

Kahu, E. R., Thomson, A., & English, B. (2020). Identity and belonging of mature-aged students engaged in distance learning: A reflective conversation. In S. Mawani & A. A. Mukadam (Eds.), *Student empowerment in higher education: Reflecting on teaching practice and learner engagement* (Vol. 1, pp. 213-230). Logos Verlag.

Conference presentations:

Kahu, E. R., & Gerrard, H. (2018, April). Engaging online students in citizenship through weekly critical reflections. In *Conference proceedings: Inception to infinity* (pp. 36-39). Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand

Kahu, E. R. (2021). The importance of whanaungatanga: Building relationships with first-year online students. In Proceedings of STARS: Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success Conference [Online]. https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Publications-and-others/The-importance-of-Whanaungatanga-online_Massey-Uni.pdf

Videos:

Dr Ella Kahu - The Importance of Whanaungatanga: Building Relationships with First-Year Online Students (STARS Conference [online] 2021) 12.20 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VPzQ-LSyWo&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnfl&index=9>



Dr Ella Kahu - What can I do as a Teacher (2019 First Year Experience Learning and Teaching Forum, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) 3 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck9G-IT7Bw&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnfl&index=5>



Dr Ella Kahu – We all have a Role in Student Engagement (2019 First Year Experience Learning and Teaching Forum, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) 3.29 minutes.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1O1Ky_1Or64&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnfl&index=6



Dr Ella Kahu – The Importance of Empathy (2019 First Year Experience Learning and Teaching Forum, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia) 2.10 minutes.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_roZFZeipXo&list=PLToovjcL4Qb13sA-otoKgRCujXgzFQnfl&index=7

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