

Teaching in University Settings: Vignettes of Student Engagement

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Abstract

As access to tertiary education has increased worldwide, the importance of understanding the complexities of student engagement has become progressively evident. Yet, studies on student engagement are frequently abstract, and commonly informed by statistics on completion rates. Understandings of student engagement at the micro-engagement level are often sparse. The current study utilised Innsbruck Vignette Research (IVR) to explore and explain student engagement at a micro-engagement level across multiple subject fields. Four exemplary vignettes were extracted from a dataset of 22 vignettes, collected at tertiary institutions in Austria and South Africa. Data were collected *in statu nascendi* (as it emerges) during lectures on music, education, physics, and mathematics. Findings foreground the importance of classroom climate, emotional atmosphere, and intimate interaction interfaces between lecturers and students. Findings furthermore suggest inordinate pressure on lecturers for engagement and propose increased advocacy for student agency in the student engagement equation.

Keywords: Student engagement, teaching, tertiary education, student success, quality education, vignette research

Introduction

In the higher education context, the quality of student engagement is significantly associated with improved learning outcomes. In a meta-analysis of factors influencing student engagement across higher education institutions in various global contexts, Li and Xue (2023) identified 14 “promoting” and “hindering” factors. Factors promoting learning participation in higher education included positive teacher behaviour, the teacher–student relationship, students’ positive emotion, positive learning behaviour, students’ learning and thinking ability, students’ individual and personality characteristics, the support of learning resources, and generic teaching factors. Negative teacher behaviour, negative student behaviour, and a lack of environmental



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support were identified as hindering factors of student engagement, thereby underscoring the importance of the interactional and relational pathways within this phenomenon.

In this regard, several studies have pointed to the importance of the quality of students' relationships with their lecturers and teachers (Boon, 2026; Eloff & Dittrich, 2021; Farr-Wharton et al., 2018; Montenegro, 2022; Reschly & Christenson, 2023), with Osterman (2000) indicating experiences of teacher–student relatedness as even more influential than peer and family support for learning. As universities seek to improve retention, optimise programme completion, and ensure student success, advancing conceptualisations of student engagement remains paramount (Picton & Baik, 2024).

This study explores how the engagement interface presents at the micro level in tertiary education. Qualitative Innsbruck Vignette Research (IVR) is employed to capture micro-moments in teaching and learning to highlight how educator–student interactions present within higher education lecture halls with a special focus on teacher educators.

Student Engagement in University Settings — Literature Review

Although student engagement is a priority in many tertiary institutions, the ways in which it is conceptualised and the specific focus of student engagement may differ between universities and across countries (Lowe & Parkin, 2023; Strydom et al., 2010; Tinto, 2010). Some scholars have referred to the “black box” of student engagement (Trowler et al., 2022), while others have similarly highlighted the vagueness of the notion of student engagement (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). In addition, initiatives to improve student engagement are also recurrently coupled with advances in educational applications of technologies (Balalle, 2024), online learning (Brown et al., 2022; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022), artificial intelligence (Nguyen et al., 2024), and the use of chatbots (Abbas et al., 2022). While noble and even appropriate, these strategies may inadvertently increase the ‘distance’ between lecturers and students, even as they engage students in learning tasks. Some scholars (Clark & Talbert, 2023) have also explored alternative grading practices to improve student engagement, while others (De Bruijn-Smolders & Prinsen, 2024; Loots et al., 2023) have explored blended learning. As pointed out by Tinto (2023), “engagement matters” (p. 2) although its impact remains relatively under-explored.

In the United States context, the National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) is, however, an instrument through which data have been collected from more than 1,458,000 undergraduate students at nearly 1,200 four-year colleges and universities since 2000 (Harper & Quaye, 2009, pp. 5–6). This survey delineates five benchmarks of effective educational practice in relation to student engagement: i) level of academic challenge, ii) active and collaborative learning, iii) student–lecturer interaction, iv) enriching educational experiences, and v) a supportive campus environment. Although benchmarks (or conceptual parameters) such as these have high utility in tertiary education, some scholars (Gourlay, 2015) have cautioned against mainstream discourses on student engagement, which invoke categories and typologies. Gourlay (2015) argued that the concept of student engagement, and sites of learning where it is enacted, are “constantly emergent, contingent, and restless” and should, as such, raise questions about ‘common-sense’ approaches and allow for inherent contradictions (p. 402).

Students entering higher education are highly diverse in the factors that enable and inhibit their academic engagement (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). There are often complex social factors, including kinship obligations in extended families and practical family responsibilities, that impact the time, energy, and levels of commitment that can be dedicated to university studies (Trowler et al., 2019). Teaching university students may therefore present unique challenges to lecturers, since students may not be fully present intellectually (or physically) during lecture times.

In this regard, Zepke (2014) critiqued an instrumental view of knowledge and the emphasis on performativity often embedded in views of student engagement at university. Contending that, in trying to be all things in teaching and learning, initiatives to improve student engagement frequently focus too much on an engaged, generic student, while failing to acknowledge the impact of varying student contexts in university lecture halls. This may, in part, explain why decades of progress in increasing access to higher education for low-income students has not translated into equivalent increases in degree completion. On this matter, Tinto (2022) advocated acknowledging the impact of micro-engagements, thereby reiterating the pertinent role of lecturers. Earlier studies showing that belonging in educational environments is significantly associated with student engagement (Thomas, 2012) furthermore suggest the importance of the quality of student–lecturer interactions and relationships.

Student engagement is thus a relational, context-sensitive, multidimensional, intersectional, historically evolving, and dynamic phenomenon. It emerges at different times and across a student's life. Yet, it is oftentimes measured in static ways, with limited recognition of fluidity over time and of the specificity of the momentary relational dimensions within the acts of teaching and learning. Some scholars (Smith & Tinto, 2024) have, as a result, argued for less static ways of measuring student engagement, with more nuanced consideration of it as a fundamentally relational and dynamic concept.

While the field of student engagement research has seen significant growth in recent years (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Reschly & Christenson, 2023; Tinto, 2022), the current study seeks to examine the dynamics of student engagement in university settings at the micro-engagement level. The study thus endeavours to address the gap in student engagement research by focusing in on the specific interactive moments between lecturers and students in university settings. Furthermore, in addition to foregrounding micro-engagements as the unit of analysis, the study leverages methodological choices in the research process that allow co-experiential insights to emerge.

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for and purpose of the study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of student engagement in university lectures at the micro-engagement level, thereby advancing nuanced insights into the phenomenon. The study aims to provide insights into the interface between lecturer–student engagement dynamics and to inform ongoing inquiries into student engagement in tertiary institutions. The study acknowledges that student engagement is an ongoing process, starting with student attraction to tertiary education, involving multiple layers of engagement beyond the lecture hall, and culminating in graduation. The current study endeavours to pinpoint the specificity of student engagement during lectures.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Broadly, the current study aligns with the Kahu and Nelson (2018) model of student engagement, but also incorporates the critique of that model offered by Trowler et al. (2022). The Kahu and Nelson (2018) model distinguishes self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being as central constructs for understanding student engagement. This model positions the “educational interface” (Kahu & Nelson, 2018) as critical to understanding the psychosocial spaces within which institutional and student factors combine for learning to occur. In the Trowler et al. (2022) critique, the dynamic, shifting, and multilocal nature of student engagement is acknowledged more pertinently. The fact that engagement is highly individual and that it presents differently over time and within moments is accepted. By using the concept of “engagement interface” rather than educational interface, Trowler et al. (2022) foregrounded the idea that movements can occur in many different directions *simultaneously*, concurrently along different facets of the student engagement phenomenon. Most critically, Trowler et al. (2022) located the notion of engagement at the interface, rather than within the individual student, as is often the case in theories of student engagement. Trowler et al.'s (2022) conceptualisation of the “tube map” format of student engagement allows for increased complexity. Multifarious pathways to engagement are represented by multiple departure and arrival points, and copious ‘vehicles’ simultaneously travelling along the same route, in the same or opposite directions. It is within this framework that the current study is positioned.

Methodology

Background to the Study

The study is conducted within a collaborative, funded research project in Austria and South Africa. Broadly, the project explores aspects of professionalism in lecturers in tertiary education. In the current study, the notion of student engagement is investigated to deepen understanding of how it manifests when lecturers in tertiary education facilitate learning across a variety of subject fields in teacher education. The study asks, “How does the engagement interface present at the micro level in tertiary education?”

Vignette Research

In this study, we intentionally adopt IVR as a phenomenologically oriented methodology (Agostini et al., 2024) to explore student engagement as it unfolds in concrete teaching–learning situations in university settings. IVR captures intensely detailed observational data *within the teaching moment* and then, from the observations, creates raw vignettes that depict micro-moments in the teaching and learning dynamic. Raw vignettes are developed into final vignettes over time through a process of vignette and resonance readings.

Rooted in a continental phenomenological tradition, IVR seeks to attend closely to the lived experience of educational moments by capturing experience *in statu nascendi* that is, experience as it emerges in its immediacy (Agostini et al., 2024). Lived experiences are shared, sensed, interpreted, and re-evoked between vignette researcher(s) and participant(s). Rather than eliciting retrospective accounts, IVR foregrounds the immediacy of pedagogical encounters, capturing how teacher educators orient themselves to students and how engagement emerges not only from gestures, tone, movements, and emotional attunement but also from the physical environment. The resulting descriptions of different scenes as vignettes do not aim for representativeness or generalisation; instead, they preserve the atmospheric, relational, and situational qualities of pedagogical moments that often remain overlooked in conventional self-report or survey-based methodologies (Agostini et al., 2024).

The crafting of raw vignettes is followed by resonance readings (Agostini et al., 2024), during which multiple researchers collaboratively interrogate the narrative text for clarity, depth, and fidelity to the originally co-experienced moment. Through this dialogical process, co-experienced experiences are made accessible and communicable. The subsequent vignette readings mark the beginning of systematic analysis, whereby researchers examine how meaning is constituted within the educational encounter and how engagement takes shape at the relational interface. Final vignettes thus serve simultaneously as data and as analytic artefacts: they reveal how lecturers and students orient themselves to one another, how atmospheres shift, and how engagement becomes visible — or remains tacit — within the flow of a lesson.

The rationale for using IVR in the present study lies in its capacity to illuminate micro-engagements that are typically obscured by broader conceptualisations of student engagement. Moreover, IVR makes visible the subtle yet consequential pedagogical gestures, atmospheres, and relational movements that teacher educators enact — often intuitively — during their instructional practice. By capturing experience *in statu nascendi*, IVR focuses not on what teacher educators claim to do, but on what they actually do in moments of encounter with their students. By slowing down and rendering visible the moment-to-moment textures of classroom life, IVR provides a methodological lens attuned to the dynamic, affective, and multilocal character of engagement. It thereby aligns with contemporary calls to move beyond static measures of student engagement and to acknowledge its relational, emergent, and often fragile nature within higher education environments.

Participants

From the final vignettes, participants (n=4) included lecturers working in the field of teacher education at tertiary institutions in Austria and South Africa. Their ages ranged from 32 to 63, and their highest qualifications included a master's degree (one participant) and doctoral degrees (three participants). They had between two and 19 years of experience teaching in higher education. Participants were provided with background information on the study and informed about confidentiality and anonymity. All participants consented to the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

As per the IVR methodology, data were collected *in statu nascendi* through co-experienced experiences during in-person, face-to-face lectures with lecturers and undergraduate students in university settings in Austria and South Africa. This allowed the research team to collect data on student engagement as they emerged in lecture halls. Moments of co-experiences were captured in electronic or written format by a team of five researchers and then utilised to craft a set of raw vignettes. In total, 22 raw vignettes were crafted in English and German.

In IVR, raw vignettes need to be deeply rooted in experiential protocols. The fidelity of the raw vignettes can therefore be traced to original notes. The raw vignettes in this study were subjected to an in-depth process of resonance readings. In resonance readings, raw vignettes are subjected to peer review to screen for clarity, meaning-making, textual interpretation, authenticity, and technical quality.

Following the series of vignettes and resonance readings, the raw vignettes were revisited and revised, then crafted into final vignettes. In IVR, the process of resonance readings constitutes the initial phase of data analysis, with the final vignettes and the vignette readings presenting as the 'results' or findings of the study. All final vignettes were member-checked with participants, and pseudonyms were adopted in the vignette texts for anonymisation.

Findings

From the set of 22 vignettes, four exemplary vignettes are shared here to illustrate, at the granular level, manifestations of student engagement in tertiary education. Findings, presented here as vignettes, illustrate the importance of classroom climate, emotional atmosphere, and intimate interaction interfaces between lecturers and students in university settings. The tangible pressure on lecturers for student engagement is specifically evident. The results of the analysis will be addressed and discussed in the Discussion section.

The four vignettes were selected for reasons of diversity in terms of subject field, geographic location, and tertiary institution. Each vignette was written by a different vignette researcher. The first vignette takes place during a music lecture at a South African university:

The music room is on the second floor of the music building, behind the campus auditorium. It is a balmy summer afternoon. Small tables with brightly coloured tablecloths fill the right-hand side of the room. On the left, large xylophones stand juxtaposed with the small tables. Six large neon lights glare down from the ceiling. She wears a soft khaki-green top and big black boots. Her green eyes sparkle as she speaks to the two students who are helping her to carry large African drums from the storeroom to each small table. They place the drums beside the tables. More students are entering the room. They sit down at the small tables, looking at the vibrantly coloured, still screen in front of them. She greets each student by name. "Right, I'm going to show you four videos," she says while showing four fingers with her right hand to the class. "Ag, Richard, lights, please." A student gets up and switches off the lights. The room dims. Standing, she presses a play button on the screen of one of the two laptops on the large table in the front. A dance video starts playing, and the still screen in front comes alive. As the video concludes, the same student gets up to switch on the lights again. The neon lights flicker back on again. "If we look at the drama elements, what do you see?" she enquires. The screen in front now lists drama elements: Tension. Focus. Mood. Time. Contrast. Symbol. Space. A low hum from the air conditioner fills the room as she waits ... and waits ... for the students to answer. (Vignette writer: Irma Eloff)

The second vignette depicts an interaction at the start of the semester, shortly after students return to campus following a holiday period. The lecture takes place at an Austrian university, and the field of study is education:

The teacher educator greets her students in a friendly manner and says in a loud voice, "Good morning! It's 8:15 a.m., time to start. A total of 24 undergraduate students are taking part in the seminar. Please all come out once and form a circle." The teacher educator gestures and shows where the students should stand — in an open seat at the front of the seminar room. The seminar room is bright, with many windows on one wall. After the students have hesitantly left their seats and formed a circle, the teacher educator explains in a motivated voice, "You've all just come back from holiday. Important words for holidays are elephant, palm tree, toast, and fruit salad. What sound does an elephant make?" The students form a trunk with their arms in a reserved manner. The teacher educator asks in a bellowing voice, "What else does an elephant have?" and hastily answers her own question: "Ears!" A few students raise their arms and form elephant ears. They giggle and start talking to each other. Some students speak rambunctiously in cheerful voices. The teacher educator watches them and smiles. (Vignette writer: Ann-Kathrin Ditttrich)

The third vignette captures moments from a physics lecture in the Austrian context:

It's 9:25 in the morning. The seminar room has no windows, and the fluorescent lights cast an even brightness across the space. Five round tables stand around the room, yet seven students sit together at one table, close enough to speak easily without touching. At the back table, Martin, the lecturer, sits slightly behind the students, his posture still and attentive, the camera beside him continuing to record. Martin is a medium-tall young man with tied-back light brown hair and a short beard, dressed simply in jeans and a white shirt. After microteaching of one of the students, as the activity of a small collaborative physics task where students used pucks to test how an impact changes direction or speed, comes to an end, Martin speaks for the first time, starting with, "Thank you. Now let's talk." His voice is low and deliberate. One by one, students begin to reflect on their predictions, the experiment, and their feelings about the task. Ahmad, Suzan, Lilli, and Elias share their thoughts without turning toward the teacher or making eye contact. They speak quietly and briefly, focusing on the worksheet in front of them. Martin gives feedback: "Your example was good," "You could strengthen the transition next time." Student Sara notes that they weren't sure if magnets could affect the puck at all. Martin affirms the question, gently reminding them, "Even passive objects can be part of an impact. We don't always have to be certain, just curious." In the last exchange, Martin says, his tone calm, "Some say: as physics teachers, we must always know the answer. I think not. Sometimes, the best move is to ask, 'What do you think?' and let the thinking unfold." (Vignette writer: Maryam Rabani Nia)

The fourth vignette shows a moment of student engagement in a mathematics lecture at a South African university:

It is early morning. About 50 undergraduate mathematics students, mostly female, are gathered in a lecture room that can seat around 100. Mari is connecting her laptop to the white screen in front of her. The air is cool and crisp. There is an energetic, anticipatory sound of students talking amongst themselves, catching up. Mari moves quickly and with intention towards the long desks where the students are seated. A calm and quietness engulf the room. Some students look at her with expectation, their eyes fixed on her, their bodies still. Others stay disconnected, staring at their cell phones and laptop screens. A few more students enter, breaking the silence. Behind them, the heavy wooden doors slam shut automatically, causing a noise. Mari walks even closer to the front row. "Where is everyone?" she asks. Her tone of voice carries her questions: "Was there a message not to come? Or were there problems with the buses again?" A couple of students confirm her last statement, heads nodding: "Yes." "Let's acknowledge them when they enter and then continue. We have an exciting lesson today," she says cheerfully, but to the point. More students arrive in small groups, breaking the quiet, calmness, and sense of expectancy in the room as the wooden doors bang shut behind them. "Put your phone down and on silent, computers closed, and focus," echoes the instruction. "Look at your neighbour, and ask them if they are awake, alert, and alive." Suddenly, the energy level rises again, with chatter as students check in with their peers sitting next to them. Mari walks up and down the stairs along the sides of the room, stopping at a few students to engage them in conversation. Mari walks to the front and positions herself in the front of the lecture hall. She starts a question-and-answer session about their assignments. A female student in the third row puts up her hand to ask a question. About 20 more students arrive 10 minutes late, causing the doors to slam again. There is a shuffle of feet and bodies as they find their seats. Mari moves closer to the front row, slightly leaning forward with her upper body, shortening the distance to the student who raised the question. (Vignette writer: Wietske Boon)

Discussion

The vignettes of student engagement presented here illustrate that engagement is not produced by a single teaching strategy but by a constellation of modes, including emotional, physical, cognitive, and social engagement. All the vignettes show how lecturers actively initiate and structure engagement continuously, adapting the course of classroom discussions and resonating with student responses. Student engagement in this study is also facilitated by the spatial and material aspects of the learning environments, which influence how engagement manifests at the interface among students, lecturers, and learning materials.

The vignette study also shows how student engagement often arises from educational stimuli provided by the lecturer, which may take the form of verbal feedback, instructions, posing reflective questions, and changing the positions of people and objects in the learning space. Yet the vignettes also indicate that the commitment to engagement fluctuates throughout a lecture, with lecturers leaving ample room to negotiate student responsiveness (and non-responsiveness). Within the same lecture (Vignettes 2, 3, 4), 'participation' may vary within the same or subsequent teaching moments. In addition, the vignettes indicate simultaneously invisible and highly visible moments of student engagement, with some student engagement (activities) being highly visible (2), while other moments are more subliminal and reflective (3).

The importance of personal relationships and connections to facilitate engagement is also evident in the vignettes, with one lecturer, for instance, greeting students by name (1), another using humour to make the post-holiday season transition to academic life (2), and another checking in on the well-being of students and their levels of 'awakeness' (4). Nevertheless, the vignettes also showcase moments of 'disconnection' that present within the educational interface, despite intentional efforts at engagement by lecturers in all the vignettes. Subtle forms of disengagement present as non-responsiveness to a question posed (1), hesitation to participate in a learning task (2), avoiding eye contact (3), or arriving late to the lecture, and using devices not connected to the learning task (4).

The vignettes illustrate the importance of classroom climate and the emotional atmosphere during a lecture. As indicated by Trowler et al. (2022), emotions facilitate affective student engagement. While it arises from an individual's subjective response to situations, this intimate interaction interface between lecturers and students is deeply linked to the learning task. It is also fluid and fluctuating. In this study, emotions are used to facilitate transitions (2, humour), and reflection (3, sense of calm), and to deal with interruptions (4, patience). The vignettes also showcase various forms of curiosity (3, 4), friendly interactions (1, 2, 3, 4), and supportive responses (1, 2, 3, 4).

Harper and Quaye (2009, pp. 5–6) defined student engagement in terms of five benchmarks of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–lecturer interactions, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments. Although the definition of student engagement in their view extends beyond the lecture hall, all five of these benchmarks are evident in the vignettes from the current study. However, although

the current study supports the notion of student engagement as dynamic, shifting, highly individual, multilocal, and presenting differently over time and within moments of teaching and learning, the vignettes also illuminate the inordinate (and, some may even argue, unequal) pressure on lecturers to engage students. While this responsibility is intrinsic to the teaching task, it also leaves room *on the side of the students*, for ‘student’ engagement. In the vignettes (i.e., findings) from this study, this side of the student engagement equation presents as muted and perhaps uneven. The lecturers in the vignettes are creating academic challenges, encouraging active learning, interacting with students intentionally, enriching the educational experiences within the learning environment, and utilising various resources to support engagement. Yet, students’ efforts, though present, are not equally visible.

In addition to inequitable ‘effort’ between students and lecturers, the way in which student engagement presents also indicates continued instability. The moments of instability captured in the vignettes align with Trowler et al.’s (2022) tube map format of student engagement. As indicated, this allows for complexity, multiple departure and arrival points, and ‘vehicles’ travelling along the same route simultaneously, and in the same or opposite directions. The vignettes in the current study show a fair number of ‘one-way’ vehicles (lecturer-to-student) and several moments of instability in the educational interface. Taken together, these vignettes suggest that lecturers in other higher education settings may support student engagement through relational presence, a supportive classroom climate, reflective questioning, patience during interruptions, and small acts of recognition that reduce distance and encourage participation.

In answering the question “How does the engagement interface present at the micro level in tertiary education?” the current study therefore agitates for increased awareness of student responsibilities within the dynamics of student engagement. It also acknowledges complexity and instability as integral to student engagement, and suggests that a focus on the micro-dynamics of student engagement may inform strategies for student engagement at the macro level.

Contribution and Limitations

The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of student engagement at the micro level in tertiary education. However, it also has several limitations. While student engagement is observed, the study does not directly include students’ personal perspectives on their engagement experiences. The study did not include measurement of the success or extent of student engagement in the various subject fields. Future research could thus integrate interviews or reflection journals to explore how they themselves interpret moments of engagement and disengagement at the reciprocal, micro-engagement level. Academic performance may also be assessed in parallel. Future research could also focus on lecturers’ strategies for intentionally supporting student engagement. The study was conducted in two national contexts (Austria and South Africa) and may therefore not be applicable or transferable to other contexts. In addition, the vignette research methodology is a relatively new qualitative methodology and may therefore need some clarification for scholars encountering it for the first time.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how student engagement manifests at a micro level during higher education lectures and seminars. Using the IVR methodology, the findings present moment-to-moment dynamics through which student engagement emerges within different strategies that are related to emotional, physical, and cognitive aspects. The study highlights that student engagement should be understood as a shared and relational responsibility rather than as the sole outcome of lecturers’ teaching practices. While lecturers play an important role in creating conditions that foster engagement, it emerges through the interaction between lecturers, students, and the learning environment, and further influencing factors. In this regard, strengthening awareness of student agency is equally important, as students actively shape their own engagement through participation, preparation, and interaction in the learning process. Higher education teaching can therefore benefit from creating spaces that encourage students to reflect on their responsibility for learning and to make purposeful use of available learning resources and opportunities for interaction on different levels. Understanding engagement as a co-constructed phenomenon underscores the importance of relational teaching practices and students’ active roles in university learning environments.

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