

Engaged much? An applied perspective of classroom practices used to engage students at the university level in England

Dr. Victoria Bowen¹ & Dr. Simon Brownhill¹

¹School of Education, University of Bristol, England

sciforum-170688

INTRODUCTION & AIM

Student engagement is a significant priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the globe (Dismore *et al.*, 2019), one which is perceived as reflecting education quality as well as influencing outcomes such as 'student success, retention [and] learning outcomes' (Shomotova and Ibrahim, 2025, p.1206). Emphasised in government policy (Bowden *et al.*, 2021), student engagement operates as a key benchmark metric of institutional performance, serving as a critical driver of 'international indices and barometers' (p.1208) such as improved National Student Survey (NSS) scores and higher Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) ratings.

Encouraged by its presence in contemporary tertiary discourse, and **IN AN EFFORT TO STIMULATE READER INTERACTION WITH OUR POSTER**, we invite you, the reader, to consider what you think is meant by 'student engagement', comparing your personal/professional thoughts with the work of Vuori (2014), and critically reflecting on the ambiguities that are associated with definitions of the term (see Wang, 2025) and its conceptualisation.

An examination of existing studies about student engagement reveals a prominence of university learners' perceptions regarding its 'enhancing influence' [our words] on their personal and professional development; this prompted Owusu-Agyeman (2022, p.661) to acknowledge 'a paucity of research on the position of academics [...] on how they could enhance student engagement in higher education'. The empirical research reported in this poster offers an exploratory contribution in addressing the gap noted by the observation above, purposefully investigating operational classroom practice (due to the professional interests of the authors of the poster) as opposed to interrogating 'expensive interventions' or 'systems' (Crabtree, 2023, p.4) that are designed to stimulate student engagement at a tactical/ or strategic level.

METHOD

Serving as a 'visual vehicle' [our words] for our research, our poster reports on a small, institutionally-approved qualitative study of activities and strategies that were identified by academics (n=19) as 'engaging' for students (both home and international; from across the degree portfolio) when in the university classroom (defined here as lectures, seminars, workshops, supervisions and tutorials). With taught representation from all levels in a School of Education, participants from a research-intensive university in South West England took part in a small group activity (led by the second author) during a School training session on student engagement, generating original documents (n=152) in the form of individual paper 'strategy squares' (see Figure 1). Richly informed by BERA's (2024) ethical guidelines, retrospective consent was sought to rigorously analyse the documents using thematic analysis, as guided by Naeem *et al.* (2023).

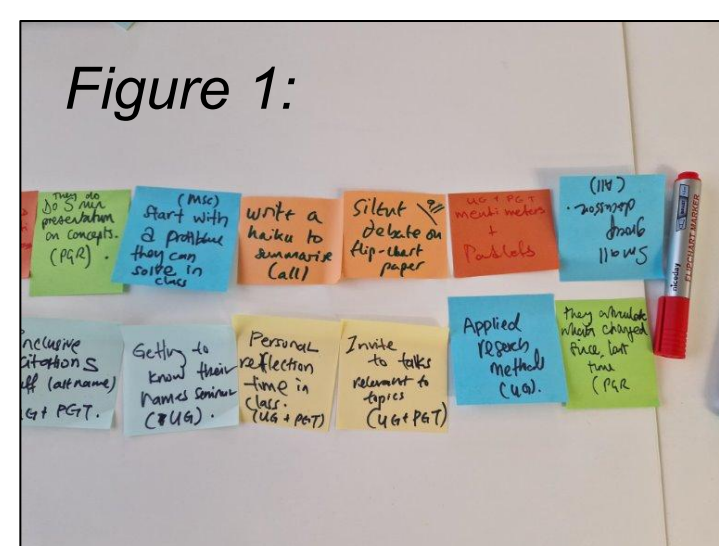
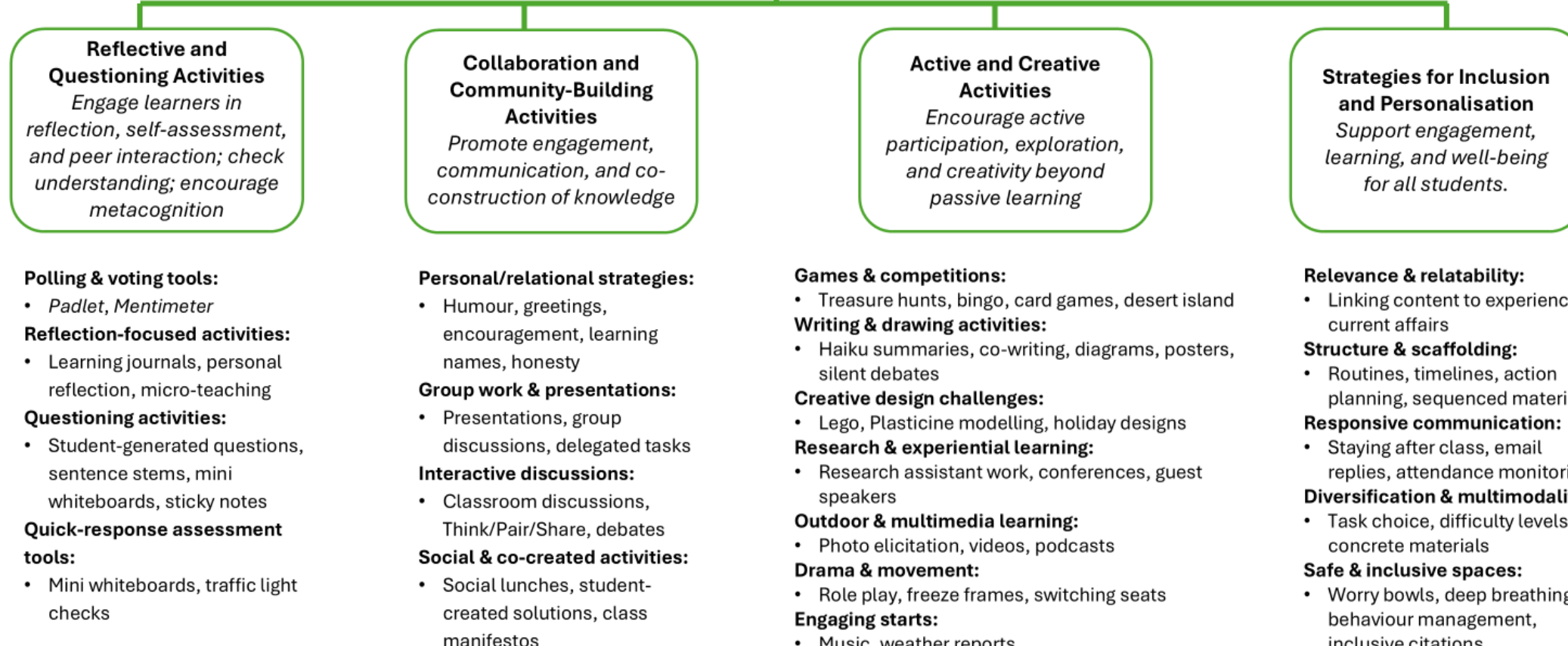


Figure 2:

Pedagogical Activities



RESULTS & DISCUSSION

A thematic map (Figure 2) offers readers a comprehensive overview of the main themes and associated sub-themes (with illustrative examples) that were generated from our systematic analysis of the data.

We invite you, the reader, to reflect on the content of Figure 2, considering which of the themes/sub-themes/examples resonate with you either as **A**) a student (*What have you experienced?*), **B**) you as an instructor (*What have you implemented?*), or **C**) you as a researcher (*What interests you in our findings?*)

The data collected reflect a broad spectrum of formative assessment techniques, active learning methods and collaborative activities that deliberately promote learner engagement, reflection and metacognitive thinking. Central to these efforts is a strong commitment to creating an atmosphere where students are encouraged to actively participate, reflect on their learning and engage in meaningful peer interactions. From reflective activities like personal journals to creative tasks such as design challenges, these strategies are significant in supporting students in becoming active, independent learners. Furthermore, a focus on inclusivity is evident in the data through intentional strategies aimed at personalising learning experiences, providing clear structures, and ensuring that all students feel valued and represented. We assert that by incorporating a range of interactive, creative and inclusive approaches, academics in the School strive to nurture a classroom culture where students are not only recipients of knowledge but are active participants in the learning process.

Collectively, the research reveals fresh insight into the variety of dynamic pedagogical strategies that are utilised in the School, as advocated by Dominguez (2024). Despite the limited scope and generalisability of the findings, the data analysis recognises student engagement to be a complex and multi-dimensional construct. Although identified strategies and activities are professionally deemed to stimulate student participation, they do prompt critical questions regarding the depth and quality of such engagement. For example, while digital tools such as *Mentimeter* can elicit rapid responses, we contend that they often cultivate only surface-level participation rather than substantive learning from students. In contrast, practices such as peer discussion and written reflection are recognised in recent literature as being more conducive to fostering sustained, critical and meaningful engagement (see Brownhill, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Our research highlights the need for academics at the HE level to critique the balance between strategies that primarily encourage student participation and those that advance deeper cognitive engagement. Critical reflections on our findings acknowledge both the influence of cultural background on students' receptivity to different pedagogical approaches, as well as the role of instructor-student relationships in shaping supportive and effective learning environments. Given the localised nature of the research sample and the exploratory design, we do call on readers of our poster to appreciate that our concluding comments above should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

KEY REFERENCES (SELECT)

Dismore, H., Turner, R., & Huang, R. (2019). Let me edutain you! Practices of student engagement employed by new lecturers. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(2), 235-249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1532984>

Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>

Owusu-Agyeman, Y. (2022). Experiences and perceptions of academics about student engagement in higher education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 20(6), 661-680. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103211053718>

Shomotova, A., & Ibrahim, A. (2025). Higher education student engagement, leadership potential and self-perceived employability in the United Arab Emirates. *Studies in Higher Education*, 50(6), 1206-1232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2367155>

Wang, Q. (2025). Re-discover student engagement from the perspective of definition and influencing factors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1428668. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1428668>