

Research Article

Is 'student engagement' just a mirage? The case for student activism

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Abstract

This paper considers the positioning of student campus activism within a discourse of student engagement to explore how student engagement becomes framed as legitimate/ illegitimate. Using pivotal points within the 2012-14 *Sussex Against Privatisation/Occupy Sussex* campaigns at the University of Sussex, we compare how student activists construct themselves with how they are constructed by the university administration. Our focus is on how student activists are positioned as troublemakers, lacking valid critical capacity and incapable of independent, mature, reasoned political positioning. We argue that the construction of student activist identities as immature and dangerous both devalues the agency of the protestors but also demonstrates how student engagement is shaped by normative discourses of what constitutes a legitimately engaged student in higher education. Positioning students as being problematic and misguided is potentially incongruous with discourses of students as consumers, as partners and as producers. We propose that in many cases, student engagement is simply a mirage for other organisational practices and that the concept is limited and can be limiting. The relationship between student engagement and activism is explored using Ahmed's (2012) work on non-performative concepts and what it means to speak in and about higher education.

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Setting the scene

What does it mean to speak and be heard as students in higher education? Words like student *engagement* and student *voice* proliferate institutional discourses but as doctoral students working at a campus alive with student activism but equally alive with neo-liberal managerial practices, we recognised the gulf between speaking and being heard. This led us to consider where (and if) student activism fits within institutional discourses of engagement, as well as what and whom might constitute a legitimate student voice in the academy. We brought these questions for discussion to the *Ethics and Student Engagement Conference* at the University of Brighton in June 2013. As we attended that day, at the forefront of our minds as researchers of the cultural sociology of higher education, were the embodied and the contextual factors behind the seemingly transparent, seemingly good, educational buzzwords of 'student engagement'. While these words had spawned a wealth of literature, projects and pedagogies, many of which appeared to have positive impacts for staff and students, to us, these words were not entirely unproblematic.

As we walked from the University of Sussex across to the University of Brighton campus on the day of the conference, we went past buildings that had been occupied by students only months before. As the campaign posters appeared to be fading in the early-morning sunshine, we were struck by the materiality of this moment of student activism that captured the attention of the national and international press. The *Sussex Against Privatisation* campaign began in May 2012 as a reaction to outsourcing of 235 jobs, including catering and security services, to private companies. On 7th February 2013, Sussex students occupied the university conference centre. During the eight weeks of occupation that followed, Caroline Lucas, MP for Brighton, drafted Early Day Motion 1216 in solidarity with the activists, which publically denounced the university's plans for privatisation. This was signed by an additional 32 MPs. On 25th March 2013, a national demonstration was held on campus, organised by Sussex student activists, with a reported 2,000 people participating. During the events of the demonstration, vandalism and destruction of university property occurred, which resulted in an injunction being granted for the university to evict the Bramber House occupation on the 2nd April (Allegretti, 2013). Several other protests and shorter occupations have occurred since, most notoriously a protest on 3rd December 2013 in

solidarity with the University and College Union (UCU) national strike over fair pay, which resulted in the suspension of five Sussex students. This event received further press when the suspended students, referred to in viral social media campaigns as 'the Sussex Five', supported by eminent human rights barrister Geoffrey Robertson QC pro bono, successfully dissolved the disciplinary hearings, arguing that they were constitutionally unfair due to the political bias of the Chair². We closely followed the reactions to these events from fellow students and academics, the university administration and print and social media and, while we were excited and inspired by the creativity and sophistication of the student campaign, we were also struck by some of the negative constructions of these students' voices as being troublesome, problematic and misguided. While painting student activists in a negative light is not a new phenomenon, we felt that it sat uncomfortably with parallel campus discourses of students as engaged voices – as consumers (e.g. via increased tuition fees), evaluators (e.g. through the National Student Survey [NSS]) and as producers (of knowledge and research).

This paper will explore three moments of the *Sussex Against Privatisation/Occupy Sussex* – the start of the occupation, the end of the occupation and the suspension of the five Sussex students – to consider what these reveal about how student activists are constructed and how they construct themselves, and the interplay between these accounts. We intend to position this debate within research on student engagement to consider if and where activism fits within these discourses. Firstly, we are interested in what it means to be engaged and to have a voice as a student in higher education. Secondly, we consider whether discourses of student voice create a normative and potentially de-politicised voice that is incongruous with student activism. In doing so we argue that the notion of student engagement needs to be problematised as being a contextual and embodied concept that shapes who becomes legitimate to speak and to be engaged.

² Our timeline has been taken from <http://sussexagainstprivatization.wordpress.com/> and corroborated by media analyses, as well as our campus experiences.

‘Troubling’ engagement?

Understanding student engagement in relation to the construction of activist student identities requires bringing together often disparate debates: research on definitions and practices of student engagement, work exploring the role and authority of students as knowledge producers and analyses of how critical behaviours are performed and regulated in higher education. What we are attempting to do via this paper is to stimulate a discussion of how engagement can be strengthened by exploring the complex social, material and political contexts operating within higher education that students, academics and administrators are producing/ reproducing.

Trowler’s (2010) literature review groups the plethora of research into student engagement as follows: i) projects to improve student learning, ii) reviews of how institutional processes support engagement and iii) exploring identity and belonging as forms of engagement with higher education, particularly in terms of widening access and maximising retention. That a vast amount of research into student engagement exists is unsurprising, as is the ever-present popularity of the concept. Similar to ‘student experience’ it invokes notions of educational purposiveness and a responsive pedagogy and has spurred numerous conferences and journals (such as this one) as well as provided the institutional impetus for those working to improve teaching and learning in higher education. Yet, as Trowler notes, while conceptually rich research does exist, the field is dominated by work that tends not to trouble the concept as much as it should, resulting in reductionist understandings of students as a unified and homogenous group and of engagement as a celebratory practice, that propagates a ‘normative agenda, characterised by discussions of gains and benefits while ignoring possible downsides’ (5). That these discourses are not thoroughly scrutinised may contribute to why students are misrecognised when enacting, what we argue, are non-hegemonic forms of engagement such as student activism.

Trowler’s (2010) review leaves conceptual space for our claim. She defines engagement broadly as ‘the interaction between time, effort and other resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience’ (3). What it means to have an ‘optimised student experience’ is, of course, dependent on your motivations and realities of study, but it could be argued that time

invested in developing your critical capacity through engagement with activism fits this definition. Furthermore, using Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris' (2004) work in schools, Trowler discusses the possibilities for multiple forms of engagement, along behavioural, emotional and cognitive lines, and the positive and negative outcomes these hold for individual students. For example, positive behavioural engagement would involve attending lectures but a negative response would be their boycott. Engagement and dissent are often posed in opposition and, consequently, forms of student activism can be deemed antithetical to the university's mission of creating a sense of belonging to the institution and its activities. Yet there is space for them to be seen along a spectrum. Indeed, Trowler agrees that students can engage both positively and negatively along these dimensions at the same time.

Staehele *et al.* (2013) call this the paradox of autonomy - the idea that universities teach students to be critical but with the concurrent risk that this critical gaze will turn upon the institution itself. This interpretation recognises that students are not mere subjects of an institution and its policies of student engagement, but have an active role in its shaping (and potential disruption). For example, both the Sussex Student's Union President and Communication Officer list student engagement within their key responsibilities. Yet Neary's (2014) research into students as producers goes further than seeing students as representatives of and for engagement, to argue that students also have an active role to play in creating knowledge in and about the university through academic research projects. Though this may not typically be seen as student engagement work, staff and students doing collaborative research potentially represents a 'productive' form of engagement with the university, resulting in positive outcomes for students and the institution.

Neary and Winn (2009) link this more broadly to a project of social activism within which the student as producer model encourages a more critical pedagogy, allowing students and staff to 'redesign the organising principle through which academic knowledge is currently being produced' (209); a direct link to the aims of the *Sussex Against Privatisation/Occupy Sussex* movement. Parallels to this can also be found in Giroux's (2012) work on Occupy and its emphasis on developing critical discourses to think differently about power and social justice. These authors points to the need for pedagogical alternatives to current neo-liberal practices in universities such

as marketisation, commodification and modularisation that act to dampen students' critical capacities by reframing them as apolitical consumers. Yet research into students' political and intellectual engagement tends to overlook issues of how such knowledge practices are shaped by the politics of identity. What it means to be engaged is shaped by normative discourses of what constitutes a legitimate voice in higher education. For example, Burke (2012) argues that critical thinking, in the often de-politicised version appropriated and offered by the academy, like academic writing, acts as a form of exclusive practice that privileges particular gendered, classed and raced forms of knowledge and knowledge making. It is important to consider, therefore, the embodied nature of the engaged/producing/activist student and what makes certain forms of engagement, and thus certain bodies, more or less legitimately engaged than others.

Macfarlane (2013) prompted the final angle to this discussion by questioning the extent to which the student engagement agenda is about the liberation or domestication of the student voice. Does naming engagement through its formalisation in committees and university mission statements, tame it, through disconnecting it from other forms of critical responses to institutional activities such as activism? Using the discourse of student as a consumer, engagement could simply be a clever marketing strategy to ensure happy customers. As Fielding asks (2001, 100):

Are we witnessing the emergence of something genuinely new, exciting and emancipatory that builds on rich traditions of democratic renewal and transformation...Or are we presiding over the further entrenchment of existing assumptions and intentions using student or pupil voice as an additional mechanism of control?

Thus the discourse around 'student engagement' could potentially come to mean only the numbers of students 'engaged' with the university enough to complete the NSS or to become an alumni donor. However notions of 'activism' are similarly as broad as those of engagement and could potentially encompass activities such as completion of surveys or donations to a cause. Yet while activist and engagement work may involve similarities and could be said to operate along a spectrum, what separates activism is it being a distinctly political activity enacted towards social change. For example, the student activists at Sussex organised in response to an increasingly privatised and marketised academy and did so in ways that went beyond official channels of student engagement such as committees. If, as Evans (2004) suggests, neo-liberal higher

education is 'killing thinking', the students here are as critically engaged as ever. Yet the response to these protests can be seen as clearly limiting specific forms of critical and political engagement.

The questions we are left with as we approach our analyses are – what does it mean to be legitimately engaged in higher education and what consequences arise if these student activists are constructed as illegitimate?

Theorising the legitimately engaged student

As we approached reading the data from the pivotal points in the occupation, we were drawn to the work of Sara Ahmed for her theorisation of the way language and bodies shape and are shaped by institutional discourses. Ahmed's (2012) study of racism and diversity in higher education argues that the institutionalisation of diversity practices, can act to silence talk of racism. Thus 'naming can be a way of not bringing something into effect' (117) and those concepts that do not do what they say are non-performatives. For example, those who report racism are depicted using analogies of noise, 'a sound that cancels out the happy buzz of diversity' (144). Indeed, the language of noise was also present in responses to *Sussex Against Privatisation/Occupy Sussex* as 'disharmony' (Duffy, 2013b). Specifically, Ahmed's work illuminates for us whether discourses of engagement also act as non-performatives, to domesticate or limit other forms of participation, commitment and connection to the idea of a university. Similar notions of the mismatch between educational policy and the complex politics of action have been analysed in the work of Stephen Ball who argues that policies 'are crude and simple. Practice is sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable' (Ball, 1994, 10). Furthermore, Morley's (1999) work on the gendered micro-politics of the academy explores how power operates through the minutiae of everyday practices in higher education to subtly distinguish and differentiate. Specifically, Ahmed highlights for us how through the operations of power within the academy, certain voices make a more acceptable, and thus more legitimate, noise than others. In talking about speaking and being heard, she states 'some more than others are given a place at the table, just as some more than others are at home in the body of an institution' (122). Consequently, the de-legitimisation of student activism points to the institutional operations of power, shaping who can speak and what gets heard in and about higher education.

Choosing our moments

Using Ahmed's work, as well as the questions illuminated through a discussion of the literature, we now turn to the three moments within the *Sussex Against Privatisation/Occupy Sussex* movement – the start of the occupation on 8th February 2013, the end of the occupation on 2nd April 2013, and the suspension of the five Sussex students on 4th December 2013 – to illuminate the ways the university administration constructed the student activists. The selected media articles are not comprehensive, but represent a sample of local, national and educational specific press coverage. Twenty-four articles published during our three selected media moments, which includes follow-up coverage, from five headline news sources, *bulletin lokal*, *harian regional*, *the BBC*, *the Argus*, *the Independent*, *the Guardian*, and *The Times Higher*, were analysed. In addition to the articles, an email message dated 27th March 2013 from the university administration to all university faculty, staff, and students was included. The articles and the email include public and published responses to the movement from university management and their representatives, which we examined through critical discourse analysis: 'a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (van Dijk, 2008, 352).

We also discuss how students represent themselves in response to these claims through a variety of print and social media. As we approached analysis, our concern was to view what we saw through two lenses of i) what ideas of student-hood do these texts rely upon? and ii) what possibilities do these allow for engagement? Quotes from the data were thus selected to illustrate wider trends in the ways students are constructed by the university administration and the ways students construct themselves. We continually move back and forth between the data and our theoretical, substantive and political concerns and also between how students represent themselves and how they are represented. Here, we are inspired by Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) process of *plugging in* where data analysis becomes about 'making new combinations to create new identities' (5) and assemblages of connections from the data. Furthermore, it is important to note here that in looking at how students are represented and how they represent themselves we made an ethical decision not to direct our analysis not at

specific individuals or practices, but at a consideration of what meanings can be made from the material and textual unfolding of specific events.

How the university administration constructs the activists

Many of the statements made by the university administration construct student activists as immature, as illegitimate political agents, and as dangerous. The term 'university administration' refers here to official responses from university management on behalf of the university. Yet we recognise that behind these official statements are a range of people and administrative structures, potentially representing diverse opinions on the matter. Thus it is important to note that our focus is not on the person(s) behind such statements but the power such statements have as institutional speech acts (Ahmed, 2012), discourses that make claims about and on behalf of institutions and their members and which demonstrate the power of institutions to decide who and what gets legitimated.

Setting limits on who can speak publically on behalf of the institution, whilst strategically sensible, can silence the heterogeneity of voices of its members. For example, since the protests against privatisation began, the university administration has made statements, sent emails, and published editorial articles that, beyond simply criticising, are potentially demonising of the activists, especially those involved in the occupation. Yet, the University of Sussex Student Union, of which all Sussex students are members, is prevented by the university from directly communicating with the student body through university email accounts without submitting all written content to the administration, who reserve the power to review and censor those emails. Robinson and Taylor (2007, 12) highlighted the imbalance of institutional power that impedes genuine student engagement:

Student voice work begins with the recognition that power inhabits all processes of social communication and that different social groups have differential access to, and in some cases privileged access to, forms of communicative and institutional power not equally available to all. ... It is the normative goal of student voice work to challenge those structures and processes of power, which curtail the opportunity to embed equality of voice for all.

Thus the limits placed on the students' communicative power acted structurally to de-legitimise their position as speakers. What it means to be engaged is framed in these hierarchies of institutional power. The students become positioned as not being engaged

in the same vision for the university as the administration and thus as being engaged problematically.

While the university acts in a paternalistic capacity to control and limit speech between the student union and its members, the administration is simultaneously constructing dissenting students using discourses of contagion, as being a troublesome, immature minority whose words need to be censored to ensure their values do not skew that of the majority. On 27th March 2013, a lengthy email to all faculty, staff, and students was sent on behalf of the university administration shortly before the occupation was evicted (Duffy, 2013a). The first line of the email suggests that the university must protect the campus community from the 'dangerous' activists (all emphases ours): 'In light of events this week on campus and the steps we have had to take to *safeguard* our students, staff and campus visitors' (Duffy, 2013a). The moment rogue individuals caused damage during the 25th March 2013 demonstration, the political legitimacy the campaign had gained before those acts were subsumed by discourses of violence. Consequently, the whole group of student activists became constructed as troublemakers, paralleling as van Dijk calls a process of othering which involves 'derogating, demonising and excluding the Others from the community of Us' (van Dijk, 2008, 362). Within an editorial article in the *Times Higher Education* (Duffy, 2013b), the suggestion is made that all members of the occupation are 'violent' and responsible for the actions of a few demonstrators out of, reportedly, nearly 2,000 participants (Allegretti, 2013) in the 25th March campus demonstration:

Looking at the *trouble* we have had in recent weeks – with protesters (at least some of whom are our students) breaking into our main administrative building, wrecking furniture, daubing graffiti, burning documents and stealing staff possessions – some may wonder if the changes we have planned can be worth the current *disharmony*. ... Naturally, I would prefer it if we had not had to deal with the *violence* (Duffy, 2013b).

Referring to the occupation activists' involvement in organising the 25th March demonstration, a university spokesperson said:

They used the space that they were occupying to organise the demonstration, in which most of them participated, without any reference to the university authorities or the police. ... This *reckless act* endangered the safe operation of the campus and the health and safety of our staff and students (BBC News, 2013a)

In this statement, planning an event becomes a 'reckless' act in itself, regardless of

whether the demonstration was intended to be peaceful, purely because the student activists did not seek permission from the university or the police. Thus, they are constructed as immature, needing authoritative guidance and enforced limitations on their political engagement. This is contrary to the student-as-consumer rhetoric that even the university administration propagates, as evidenced by the justification the administration uses for pursuing privatisation of services despite mounting dissent:

Almost all of our students, domestic or overseas, now pay substantial fees to study at Sussex. It would be foolish, and *morally* wrong, to think we could take their money, ignore the improvements we need to make in services and carry on as before (Duffy, 2013b).

In this statement, the administration suggests that their actions are not only in the best interest of the fees-paying student population, but asserts moral superiority in the face of those who would oppose them. Rather than actually adhering to the notion of 'the customer is always right' that they seem to advance by mentioning student fees, the administration pursues a 'father knows best' model of decision making that continues to construct the activists as immature and illegitimate.

The university administration used the damage and vandalism caused during the 25th March demonstration as justification for both the eviction of the occupation and the prohibition of all campus protests unless consent to protest was granted by the university (Jamieson and Malik, 2013). Requiring activists to seek permission from the university administration in order to protest against the university administration further devalues the student activists' voice. Their participation in political dissent becomes illegitimate and their forms of engagement become unauthorised and, therefore, dangerous. It should be noted that while four students were arrested during the eviction of the occupation, including one student who was 'charged with causing criminal damage during the [25th March] demonstration'; all four cases against those students were dismissed (BBC News, 2014).

The university administration continued to suggest that student activists are dangerous after five students were suspended indefinitely from the university following peaceful protests related to the national strike over fair pay in higher education in December 2013. Each of the suspended students received a letter from the university, indicating that they were 'a *threat to the safety* or well being of students, staff or visitors', and 'a *potential hazard* to sustaining the university's policies on health and

safety' (Mendelsohn, 2013). In many of their statements and publications, the university administration created a battle of us-versus-them and painted the protestors as military combatants, in the face of whom the university must stand their ground: 'What some protestors really mean is that *we will not give in to their demands* to call a halt to the whole process. And we will not. ... *We are not going to retreat*' (Duffy, 2013b). Following the suspension of the five students, a university spokesperson was quoted in *The Independent*: 'We have excluded these students to *protect* the interests of all of the students, staff and visitors who are entitled to use the campus without *fear of intimidation and serious disruption*' (Mendelsohn, 2013). The political engagement of the suspended student activists is constructed as 'fear' inducing and their membership in the campus community is revoked solely on the grounds that they *might* cause disruption, not on the basis of any actual evidence of disruption caused. Student engagement through political dissent is constructed solely as problematic and disruptive. The administration insisted that it must exclude those five protestors to 'protect' the university from the threat that the activists posed, even though multiple news agencies described their activities as 'peaceful protest' (Mendelsohn, 2013; Richardson, 2013; Young-Powell, 2013). It is important to note that all five students were reinstated less than a week after the suspensions were issued (BBC News, 2013b) and that the university disciplinary hearing for the five students "collapsed" (Grove, 2014). As McQuillan (2014) wrote of student activists:

Dissenting voices are not considered co-creators of an academic community, but are instead frequently dismissed as part of a minority of troublemakers. In the rare event of student criticism that is accompanied by open displays of dissent, such as occupations and demonstrations, it is usually met with the full rigour of institutional procedure and more often than not criminal law.

A fee-paying student who completes the NSS would be considered 'engaged' by the neo-liberal standards of the student-as-consumer model. However, when that same student engages in political and social protest, using their voice to express dissent against the organisation to which they pay their fees, then they become the enemy against whom the university must declare war.

How student activists construct themselves

It is crucial to note, before starting this section, that both 'students' and 'activists' are

stand-ins for diverse groups of individuals with their own identities, meanings and motivations. Thus as above, our focus is not on specific individuals but rather on how the words and actions of student activists inform our understanding of them as critical thinkers who are engaged in shaping their political and social world. It is important to see how they construct critical voice, often in opposition to the ideas discussed in the previous section. From the student data captured through social, online and print media as well as a student produced documentary about the campaigns we noted three broad themes with students voicing i) a frustration at their lack of legitimate representation ii) an ethical concern for engagement with each other and with the university iii) a sophisticated political critique of higher education.

The *Sussex Against Privatisation/Occupy Sussex* activists crafted a sophisticated, contemporary and multi-faceted campaign, including a website documenting the support they've received both on campus and around the world (including high profile supporters such as Noam Chomsky), a Twitter account followed by nearly 4,500 people and Facebook pages and groups with almost 6,000 followers. A 45- minute documentary created by the student activists titled *Sussex: One Community* was released on YouTube and has been viewed over 1,600 times³. The anti-privatisation campaign's symbol of solidarity, a yellow square or ribbon, could be seen on the lapels of countless students and staff and displayed in windows across campus. Although engaging in occupation garnered media attention, it was just one of their strategies of resistance. As Giroux wrote of occupation as a form of protest (2013, 31) 'the protesters are making a claim for a sense of collective agency in which their voices must be heard as part of a concerted effort to shape the future that they will inherit.'

The campaign intensified after students and staff felt their views were not represented through the traditional means of the university committee. Two student representatives to senate, the most senior decisional panel in the university, resigned on 14th June 2013 stating that 'consultation [by university management] often occurred only after decisions had been made, adding that 'management doesn't seem to consider that student or staff views could have any positive impact on the way it does things'

³ All data correct as of May 2014.

(Gibney, 2013). This was later discussed by the Student Union's education officer who, in her concerns over whether student views are being fully represented stated, 'If we can't secure change in the boardroom, is it time to abandon them' (Cule, 2014). While this campaign demonstrates that students have not completely 'swapped their bandanas for seats in the boardroom' (Swain, 2014), it appears that where they have, the relationships of engagement between them and the university are clearly problematic. This is all despite assurance from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that Sussex has a 'well-established and substantial volume of staff-student engagement activity' (2013, 4). Williams (2013) states that these committee structures and the concurrent limitations placed on student activism act to domesticate the student voice and 'confirms the consumer identity of students rather than challenges it' (110). Indeed, one of the activists wrote 'protest is a way of influencing when all other avenues have been shut down. It needs to be recognised as being legitimate' (Shaw, 2013). Thus students appear to be conceptually stuck between the institutional discourses that allow them to speak that subsequently domesticate what can be spoken and activist discourses that position them as other, outside normative models of institutional engagement and as illegitimately 'wasting their time' (James, 2013). Engagement in these contexts becomes a non-performative both because it does not act for what it intends but also because it acts to silence.

Yet these students use ideas, take action, and express themselves in a way that relates to discourses of engagement to construct what they see as a moral, social and intellectual commitment between themselves as a collective and their vision of the university. For example, one of the student activists exercised the right to a Freedom of Information request to publicly reveal that the university had spent around £300,000 between February and October 2013 on legal fees and private security related to the student protests and occupations. The Vice President of the National Union of Students (NUS) stated:

It is a disgrace that Sussex University chose to criminalise its students at all, let alone waste such a ludicrous amount of money doing so. ... Peaceful protest and occupation is part of the history of the student movement and one we are very proud of. They are legitimate tactics, enshrined in our right to protest, and are available to students for when there is no other way to get their voices heard (Clark, 2014).

In another example, in the official statement after the five students were suspended, the activists point to the movement's mission to 'reclaim a university space' and that the 'systematic intimidation and censorship of those involved in legitimate, peaceful protests' contravened the 'ethics of care which ought to be present in any educational institution' (Sussex Against Privatisation, 2013). These quotes depict the students' sophisticated political, intellectual and moral concerns. Furthermore, they could be seen as a form of political *engagement* with an alternative vision for higher education as an intellectual collective, which has a moral duty to align its interests with those of its members. Indeed one of their not unreasonable requests, is for a university where 'the voices of staff and students are listened to' (Occupy Sussex, 2013), a statement that has striking similarities to definitions of engagement. It could be argued that the student engagement agenda predominantly relates to the student learning experience and that decisions relating to resource management of non-academic services do not fall into that domain. Yet the campaign rejected 'the dichotomy of producer/consumer' and instead called for an integrated university community united in the philosophy of education as a public good (Sussex Against Privatisation, 2012). Furthermore, in their desire to create alternative forms of engagement in and about higher education, the students are critical of how their positioning as consumers is, in fact, disempowering:

Universities today are reliant on the transience of their student body, or as they see it their customers. This has led to curtailing the potential of a united community able to resist changes threatening its modes of existence (Segalov⁴, 2013).

Student engagement, understood within a higher education system increasingly dominated by the language and practices of the market is instead doing the opposite; it is non-performative, it is *disengaging*.

We use these students' self-constructions to represent a powerful and sophisticated critical voice that we feel was sidelined and misrepresented. Furthermore, the student perspective gives further weight to our argument that institutional discourses of student engagement are non-performative. If we return to the questions of engagement with what, by whom and for what purpose, student activism can be

⁴ We intentionally chose not to focus on specific individuals within the article when possible. However, we wish to clarify that Michael Segalov was a Sussex student when he wrote *the Independent* article in May 2013. He was also one of the five Sussex students suspended in December 2013.

reframed as a powerful form of disengagement that arguably does more to genuinely engage with the practice and philosophy of higher education than traditional methods of engagement allow.

Conclusion

While we see activism as part of the spectrum of engagement, that it is not seen as legitimate in this case is revealing of the limits of the engagement model and the constraints acting upon it. Potentially, engagement posits a mirage of student power that is misleading. As Bragg states, 'It can perhaps no longer be seen as a radical gesture that will necessarily challenge educational hierarchies' (2007, 243). Students believe that their identity as consumer (or as a producer, evaluator, partner or critical citizen) provides them with a recognised, valued, and powerful voice. Yet forms of engagement are filtered through discourses of who gets to speak in and about higher education. Furthermore, student activism is not simply a form of (dis)engagement but an important and sophisticated critical movement that needs a space to be discussed constructively, which we feel is lacking in the current language in and about higher education.

What we have attempted to do in this paper is offer some interrogation of how identities are constructed through texts surrounding the *Sussex Against Privatisation/Occupy Sussex* movement. We suggest that the notion of immaturity is particularly jarring at a time when we need our students to be mature enough to decide to enrol on our courses and sophisticated enough to be able to recognise our knowledge and value as an academic community when they come to evaluating it, through models such as the NSS. We hope that our reflections are just the start of a critical take on normative models of the engaged student, which we think are narrower and far less accessible than they at first appear.

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