How Wicked is Bipolar Engagement?

Wickedity:

"Wicked issues" are complex, non-linear, span conventional boundaries, require the gaze of many stakeholders, cannot be managed by single agencies acting autonomously, and depend on systemic change for real progress. The solution depends on how the problem is framed and vice-versa.

"Wicked" can also mean excellent, amazing or cool.

The old school meaning of "wicked", implying evil or malevolence, is not intended ☺

Understanding Engagement:

In seeking to understand what is meant by "engagement", some authors have considered its antithesis – if a student is not engaged, then what are they?

Mann (2001, 7) contrasted engagement with *alienation*, proposing the engagement-alienation dyad as a more useful framework to understand students' relationships to their learning than the surface-strategic-deep triad (Marton & Saljo 1976), since both "surface" and "strategic" approaches to learning are responses to alienation from the content and the process of study.

Krause (2005, 4) lists "inertia, apathy, disillusionment or engagement in other pursuits" as alternatives to engagement for the student. She describes (*ibid.*, 7) this as follows:

> Physicists use the term 'inertia' to describe the tendency of matter to retain its state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line. In the case of some students…, inertia is a germane term to describe their attitude to university and their role in it. In this context I favour the term 'inertia' over disengagement. The latter suggests an active detachment or separation, whereas the former is more suggestive of doing nothing, which aptly depicts the state of being for a group of students who do not actively pursue opportunities to engage in their learning community. For some students, the interlocking of individual and institutional interests, foals and aspirations never occurs. They do not choose or see the need to waver from their familiar path to engage with people, activities or opportunities in the learning community.

As well as the active, positive understanding of engagement typically found in the literature, Krause (ibid., 9) identifies two other interpretations of the concept. The first of these is the use analogous to "appointment", as in the phrase "I have an engagement at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon", suggesting that engagement with their studies was simply something to slot into their calendars. The second connotation was less neutral:

> For some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are the students for whom the culture of the university is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting."

This view of a "dark", hostile form of engagement stands in contrast to Mann's view of alienation as the diametric opposite of engagement, a conceptual conflict which we resolve through separating the passive response to alienation ("withdrawal", or "apathy") from the active ("conflict"), which is itself a form of engagement. We expand on this view, below.

Dimensions of Engagement:

Engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sense-making as well as activity (see Harper & Quaye, 2009, 5). Acting without feeling engaged is just involvement or even compliance; feeling engaged without acting is dissociation. Although focusing on engagement at a school level, Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004, 62-3), drawing on Bloom (1956), usefully identify three dimensions to student engagement, as discussed below:

Behavioural Engagement:

Students who are behaviourally engaged would typically comply with behavioural norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behaviour.

Emotional Engagement:

Students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.

Cognitive Engagement:

Cognitively engaged students would be invested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the requirements, and would relish challenge.

We propose that each of these dimensions can have both a "positive" and a "negative" pole, each of which represents a form of engagement, separated by a gulf of non-engagement (withdrawal, or apathy). (These terms are used in the polar sense – like electricity – rather than to denote value judgments). Thus, one can engage either positively or negatively along the behavioural, emotional or cognitive dimensions. This is illustrated in the table below:

	Positive engagement	Non-engagement	Negative engagement
Behavioural	Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm	Skips lectures without excuse	Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures
Emotional	Interest	Boredom	Rejection
Cognitive	Meets or exceeds assignment requirements	Assignments late, rushed or absent	Redefines parameters for assignments

Table 1: Examples of positive and negative engagement

It would be perfectly conceivable for a student to engage positively along one or more dimensions while engaging negatively along one or more, or to engage positively or negatively along one or more while not engaging along an/other/s. An example might be a feminist student who attends all lectures and complies positively with all behavioural engagement norms, while engaging cognitively in a negative fashion by rejecting a "phallocentric" social science and submitting assignments on a topic she defined according to her own epistemology.