



Practical Learning in a New Era: Enhancing Student Engagement Through Authentic Learning Experiences



UNE

University of
New England

Dr Somayeh Ba Akhlagh

21st July 2026

Students' engagement in higher education

- Students' engagement involves students' active participation, emotional investment, and cognitive involvement in meaningful learning experiences (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).
- Contemporary research highlights that engagement increases when students experience learning that is relevant, interactive, and connected to real-world contexts (Bond et al., 2020; Martin & Bolliger, 2022).



Students' voices in higher education

- Student voice promotes agency and belonging by positioning students as partners in the learning process rather than consumers of education (Bovill, 2020).
- Authentic dialogue between educators and students supports more inclusive, responsive, and student-centred learning environments (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019).
- When students are invited to reflect on and evaluate their learning experiences, they develop metacognition, confidence, and ownership of learning (Healey et al., 2020).
- Student feedback should move beyond evaluation and become a tool for co-creating and improving educational practices (Cook-Sather, 2020).



My Narrative; Why Change my teaching approach?

- Low attendance and engagement in theory-based on-campus classes.
- Future teachers needed stronger connections between educational theory and real-world practice.



What I Changed?

Replaced some lecture-based sessions with school-based observations.

Students visited schools implementing: Reggio Emilia
Waldorf/Steiner Montessori teaching approach

Each visit was followed by structured reflective discussions linking observations to theory.



Impact

- Increased attendance during experiential learning sessions.
- Higher student engagement and participation.
- Students reported deeper understanding of mathematical pedagogy through authentic classroom experiences.
- Enhanced readiness for professional practice.



Student feedback

“Hi Somayeh,

Hope you are well also and no worries about the short notice!

I found your teaching approach really helpful, especially the way you explained concepts in a clear and detailed way.

The hands-on examples you highlighted during our visits to different services and schools broadened my understanding of how different approaches, such as Montessori or Reggio, work in real classroom settings.

These visits also really helped me build on and deepen my understanding of these pedagogical approaches. Being able to see them in practice allowed me to make stronger connections between theory and what teaching actually looks like day to day.

I also really valued how you shared your own experiences, as it helped me reflect on how I can apply these strategies in my own teaching moving forward.

Thanks again for your guidance — it’s been really helpful.

- Kind regards”

“Meaningful learning occurs through experience and reflection.” — John Dewey



Reference list

- Bond, M., Bedenlier, S., Marín, V. I., & Händel, M. (2020). Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: A systematic evidence map. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17, 2.
- Bovill, C. (2020). Co-creating learning and teaching: Towards relational pedagogy in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 61(4), 449–463.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in higher education.
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2023). Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching.
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2020). Students as partners: Reflections on a conceptual model.
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58–71.
- Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2022). Developing an online learner engagement framework: A systematic review. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*.
- Mercer-Mapstone, L., et al. (2019). A systematic literature review of students as partners in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(6), 1135–1150.