Tell Me a Story: Using Personas to Enhance Student Engagement.

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Abstract.

Students participate in decision-making regarding teaching and learning in a variety of ways, through surveys, student representation on committees, engagement with individual lecturers and through class representation (HEA, 2016; NStEP, 2020; Algeo, 2021). These methods, however, have limitations in that they either rely on prescriptive, quantitative data collection or representation on committees in which students are in the minority, providing limited opportunities to represent the needs of all students, and in particular non-traditional students. This paper considers the current models employed in Irish HEI's and their limitations and proposes alternative ways of encouraging meaningful student-teacher dialogue and student engagement. This includes the use of a narrative inquiry approach, using personas as a methodology. The methodology adopted was aimed at providing a safe space where students can consider student and staff challenges in a teaching and learning environment, through storytelling, and anonymously advise staff on how to design the learning experience to enhance engagement. We felt the use of personas would engage diverse student groups in dialogue and provide a collective voice in how to enhance teaching and learning. This project is ongoing and reflections on the implementation of the project to date are provided.

Keywords: Decision-making; Narrative enquiry; Personas; Qualitative research; Student engagement; Typologies.

1.   What is student engagement?

There is a lack of consensus in the literature regarding an agreed definition of student engagement (Carey, 2018; Varnham, 2018). Traditionally student engagement was considered as behavioural where students attend classes, complete assignments, and answer questions in class. However, behaviour is just one dimension of engagement; students can engage in learning at a behavioural, emotional, and cognitive level (Trowler, 2010). In recent years engagement has extended beyond the classroom and considers how students participate in institutional structures, decision-making, and governance (see Varnham, 2018, p.7).

Regarding learning enhancement, the discourse has shifted beyond the elements that constitute engagement to one which recognises learners as active partners in their learning; '*involving and empowering students in the process of shaping the student learning experience*' (NUS/QAA, 2012, p.8). Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten (2011) and Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felton (2014) re-conceptualised student engagement as one of partnership – advocating for '*students as co-creators and partners*' in the learning process. They highlight the importance of students playing a participatory role in learning enhancement. How students perceive their identity in the learning environment can often act as a key barrier to partnership and co-creation. Coates (2007) identified typologies of engaged students. If we explore these in the context of learner identity, we can see that students perceive their identity differently depending on their academic and social characteristics, for example passive students may not be engaged academically and feel that they do not have a core role in teaching and learning, they see themselves as recipients of education and not active participants; however, these students may be very socially engaged.

Much research has considered engagement from the lens of the student, particularly with supporting various student typologies. However, there is a need to explore the role of the teacher in the engagement process. Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2010) online community of enquiry model considers the role of teacher presence in engaging students in communities of learning, teacher engagement and the teacher's role in engaging students; a factor which current research largely does not consider. To date much of the focus has been on the characteristics of engaged students, yet student engagement is a complex concept with many other facets, such as teacher engagement, relationship building, and redressing the balance of power (Robinson, 2012). There are often a myriad of reasons why shifting the role of students to partners can be difficult for students. Often students lack confidence in their skills to

participate in co-creation or decisions about their learning and so are reluctant to volunteer or speak up. Furthermore, diverse learner groups often do not have the time to collaborate or partner on teaching and learning initiatives in addition to study and personal commitments. Therefore, we need to explore how we can prepare students to play a new role in their education.

In this case educators need to shift the balance of learning from content and learning outcomes, to learning relationships and the learning process. This requires educators to consider student-teacher relationships and roles. Freire (1996) argued that, within a learning environment, students need to become teachers and teachers need to become students. This highlights the importance of a reciprocal learning relationship and dialogue for successful student engagement. Bovill (2020) discussed the importance of relational pedagogy, which is becoming increasingly important in an online environment, where strong student-teacher relationships are required to encourage self-regulated learning and reduce social isolation. The teacher plays a key role in facilitating this.

In a report by the Higher Education Authority (2016), it was found that Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) with a strong culture of student-teacher partnership resulted in enhanced and meaningful student engagement. The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) was launched in the same year to support both students and staff in Irish HEI's, with an aim to enhance student engagement in decision-making and foster student-teacher partnerships within these institutions (NStEP, 2020). Despite the importance placed on student-teacher relationships in the literature for student engagement, one of the lowest ranked components in the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (Higher Education Authority et al., 2021) was staff-student interaction. This paper considers how we traditionally engage our students in decisions regarding teaching and learning, and how a narrative inquiry approach, using personas, can provide a model of shared understanding. The project, outlined below, describes how this approach was adopted and illustrates how storytelling and empathy building can help identify several challenges associated with student-staff engagement.

2. Engaging students in decision-making regarding teaching and learning.

Including student voices in decision-making in HEIs and looking at students' experiences both

inside and outside of the classroom benefit and enhance the university's quality and standards, as well as develop students' critical thinking, leadership skills, employability, and improve their university experience (Coates, 2005; NStEP, 2020; Varnham, 2018). International and Irish research advocates for '*students as partners*' through engagement in decision-making and '*authentic partnerships*' in teaching and learning (Healey et al., 2014; Carey, 2018; Varnham, 2018; NStEP, 2020; Algeo, 2021). The Higher Education Authority (2016) outlined seven governance and management levels which offer students opportunities to engage in decision-making regarding teaching and learning (See Figure 1). Students can participate in a variety of ways; through the Students' Union, class representation and engagement with individual lecturers, or at more senior levels such as on institutional and national boards or committees. Students also have opportunities to be part of institutional and national projects which include student interns or associates working alongside faculty (Higher Education Authority, 2016; NStEP, 2020; Algeo, 2021).

Figure 1: Seven governance and management levels offering opportunities for student engagement (HEA 2016 p.IX & p.15, reproduced with permission.
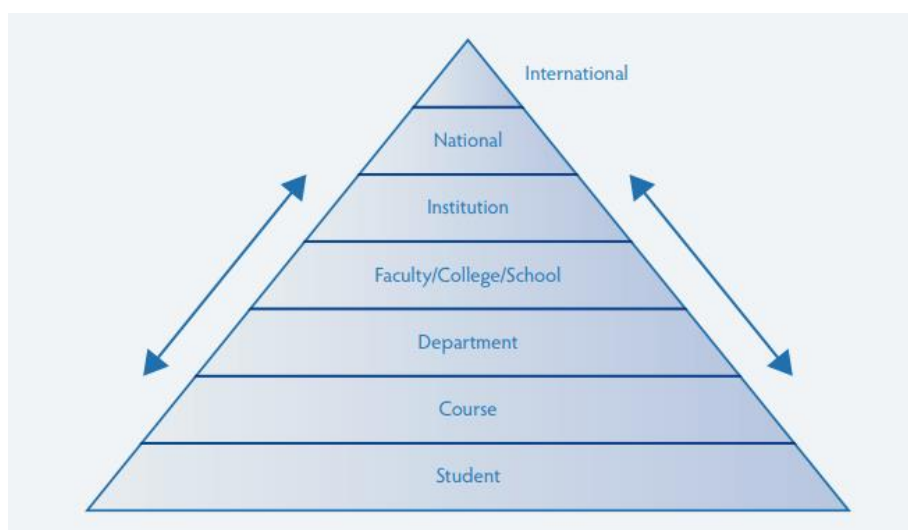
2.1 Difficulties or limitations associated with such models.

The models that are widely adopted in HE to engage students are largely structural and limited, particularly concerning fostering meaningful engagement beyond levels or types of engagement. In many cases concerns such as the balance of power, reciprocity or support dialogue are not addressed (Verwoord & Smith, 2020). In addition, students are often in the

minority on committees or asked to complete surveys, which are metrics-based and pre-prescribed, based on what academic staff feel they need to know. Table 1 illustrates the methods of engagement at various levels of teaching and learning – in particular, at an institutional, programme and modular level.

2.2 Student representation.

One of the most common forms of student engagement is student representation on committees or the class representative system. These methods are useful in providing students with a voice regarding institutional decision-making. However, students are often outnumbered by faculty in these formal settings which can be intimidating and often create a power imbalance (Carey, 2018). Such elected members are also typically high achieving students which provides limited opportunity for marginalized students to participate in decision-making (Varnham, 2018). Varnham (2018) discussed the importance of '*engaging a cross-section of students in the issues*' due to increasing diversity and a wider variety of needs within the student cohort. A dialogical approach to engaging students in decisions about teaching and learning is encouraged, with a '*strong focus on discussion and negotiation… where students feel able to speak and the university is committed to listen and respond*' (Carey, 2018). The literature highlights the importance of more informal settings for such interactions (Carey, 2018; Cuseo, 2018; Varnham, 2018). Cuseo (2018) explained how less formal or didactic contexts may give students more control over what is discussed and allow them to express their ideas more freely.

Table 1. Methods of Student Engagement in Teaching and Learning.

Level of T&L	Method	Limitations
Institutional	Student Representation on institutional committees (Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams, 2009).	Elected members are often high achievers or popular students – committees lack representation from diverse student groups (Little et al., 2009).
Institutional	Surveys (**student engagement surveys**).	Limited opportunity for meaningful feedback. Does not support a dialogical approach to engagement (Carey, 2018; Klemencic, 2017). Does not encourage reciprocal learning dialogue (Freire, 1996).
Programme	Class representatives. **Co Creation** Designing of Courses and Curricula.	Often a lack of representation from marginalized students particularly those with personal/professional commitments, disabilities, etc. (Varnham, 2018). Students are invited to be part of design teams however this is not widespread practice as academic staff often are uncomfortable implementing changes to practice regarding pedagogical planning. Often students do not have time to dedicate to such time-consuming activities in addition to their studies (Bovill et al., 2011).
Module	**Co-creation** activities inside the classroom e.g., choice of learning activities, constructing rubrics and co-developing assessments.	Effort in redressing the balance of power, skills to participate, not clear of the benefits.

2.3 Student Engagement Surveys.

Surveys are widely used to identify or rate student engagement in HEIs. They play a key role in giving students a voice and identifying good teaching and learning practices (Coates, 2005). This quantitative method reaches a wide audience and obtains objective data directly from students. Furthermore, student engagement surveys can address the balance of power in HEI's as they gather the perspectives of diverse groups of students. These surveys, however, are not without limitations, and focus on student behaviour within the classroom context (Cassidy, Sullivan & Radnor, 2021). Factors outside of the institutional setting such as informal student-faculty engagement (Cuseo, 2018), how students '*influence their own learning pathways*' (Klemencic, 2017) and how students go about constructing knowledge (Coates, 2005) are significant elements of student engagement that are not captured by these surveys. They also provide limited opportunities for meaningful engagement or interaction, and do not encourage dialogue between students and staff, or participation in decision-making (Carey, 2018; Klemencic, 2017).

Kuh (2009) explained that, because student engagement surveys are relatively short, they are unable to examine all factors that influence student engagement. Nevertheless, as Coates (2007) suggested, if institutions only have information about student behaviour within a formal, classroom context they are '*limited in their capacity to explicitly manage the student experience and to leverage out-of-class time to enhance learning*' (p.29). Therefore, it is essential that we look at alternative ways of encouraging meaningful student-teacher dialogue and student engagement.

2.4 Co-creation Methods.

Co-creation methods are occasionally adopted by individual faculty within modules. These involve meaningful engagement in which students co-create assessments, learning material and provide feedback mechanisms (see Ní Bheoláin, Lowney & O'Riordan, 2020, for an up-to-date and in-depth literature review of students as partners in assessment, suggestions for how this can be implemented and the benefits it has on student engagement). In some cases, students are provided with a choice regarding learning activities and how they engage with the learning environment. However, such instances are sporadic and are inconsistent with the '*traditional*' view of education. Students are unfamiliar with such approaches and often

experience anxiety in having to make decisions about their learning, in addition to having to engage with content and assessment processes (Kearney, 2019). Students not only need to be scaffolded and supported to develop the skills to engage in such decision-making but also need to be given time and space to do this within the classroom (Ní Bheoláin et al., 2020). Furthermore, such models encourage the student to regularly give feedback to the teacher in a reciprocal model of learning, but the balance of power associated with the traditional education system, such as grading, rules, etc., can limit meaningful interaction (Morris, 2021). Additionally, students are largely dependent on the teacher, their pedagogical approach and ability to address such limitations.

3.   Adopting   a   narrative   inquiry   approach   to engaging students using personas.

This section describes the use of personas as a model to engage students and teachers in dialogue regarding teaching and learning as part of a narrative inquiry. It is part of a project called Éist that was conducted in a small Higher Education College between January 2020 and April 2021. The project was conducted by the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development Centre in collaboration with Mary Immaculate College Students Union.

3.1 A narrative inquiry methodology.

The methodology was aimed at providing a safe space where students can consider student and staff challenges in a teaching and learning environment and anonymously advise staff on how to design the learning experience to enhance engagement. The project adopted a narrative inquiry methodology.

From the literature it is evident that a variety of methods to capture the dynamics and multifaceted elements of student engagement is central to dialogue and partnership (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Traditionally research in HE relies on quantitative data collection and '*measuring*' student engagement through surveys, rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue. Surveys largely consider behavioural dimensions of student engagement and do not consider its complex nature. Furthermore, such models often do not facilitate dialogue or the underpinning

reasons for a student perspective or opinions.

There is a need for models that are authentic and facilitate empathy to offer a basis for dialogue between staff and students. Storytelling is a historic way in which we describe experiences and, as humans, we innately tell stories as part of everyday life. Stories provide an authentic way of gathering information and allow us to capture context, experience, and feelings and attitudes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). From the literature it is evident that student engagement is multifaceted, with students having a wide variety of contexts, background and experiences that influence their overall engagement in learning and teaching. Therefore, we felt stories would be a '*natural*' way of encouraging students and staff to initiate dialogue. This led to the project team exploring the use of narrative inquiry as a model. When we hear stories, the context allows us to empathise, relate and listen to the individual (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, p.647; Kim, 2016). Often the more traditional modes of partnering with students do not provide us with a complete insight into the overall student experience and the various personal, environmental, and social factors that impact a student's engagement. Similarly, students are not familiar with the feelings and attitudes staff experience.

Traditionally narrative inquiries are conducted through narrative interviews; however, these often pose difficulties concerning power balance between the researcher and participant and require extensive rapport building (Çalışkan, 2018) – like what we experience within other modes of student engagement. Furthermore, narrative interviews are time-consuming and are not conducive to large groups. Personas are widely used in the design of user experiences, particularly in the industries that advocate user centred design (Chang et al., 2008; Faily & Fletchas, 2011). Hagg and Marsden (2019) highlighted that the use of personas facilitates empathy building. We felt personas would support us in engaging with a large number of students to provide a collective voice in how to enhance teaching and learning to support student engagement.

3.2 Persona Development.

The data collection was designed so the project team could gather narratives from a large number of students and reach diverse student groups using personas. Ethical approval was obtained from the institute's ethics committee prior to initiating the project.

Personas were developed through a grounded approach (Faily & Flechais, 2011) based on typologies of student engagement in the literature and primary research to reduce bias. Student

and teacher personas were developed based on the main challenges both staff and students experience in engaging in teaching and learning. This facilitated both students and staff to understand the complexity of each other's circumstances. In line with Faily and Flechais (2011) recommendations, we used a grounded approach based on academic literature and primary data collection to develop personas.

Student personas were based on the typologies of engaged students – in particular collaborative, passive, intense and independent students (Coates, 2007). These typologies were situated in the context of student demographics as we felt often the demographical characteristics can shape how a student engages e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate, mature students, traditional students, working students, those with caring commitments and those with learning difficulties. This allowed us to demonstrate the elements that might impact on a student's learning.

To construct the student personas a literature search was conducted for research regarding student engagement typologies using the below following search terms

- What is student engagement?

- How students typically engage in learning

- Barriers to student engagement

- Engagement typologies

- Engagement styles.

In total 63 articles were reviewed that were published between 1997 and 2020. The authors focused on 6 articles for the development of typologies; typically, typologies were developed based on personal circumstances and behaviour, social engagement, intellectual/academic engagement, student-faculty interaction, pedagogical opportunities, and motivation to engage (Coates, 2007; Jary & Lebeau, 2009; Lizzo & Wilson, 2009). Narratives from the below academic papers were drawn to construct the personas (see Table 2).

Table 2: Grounding of personas in academic literature.

Reference	Contribution to the development of personas
Lizzo and Wilson (2006).	Motivational dimension and personal focus of student.
Coates (2007).	Academic and social dimensions of engagement.
Kuh (2007).	Persona Narratives.
Jary and Lebeau (2009).	Persona Narratives. Intellectual and personal dimensions of engagement.
Hu and McCormick (2012).	Persona Narratives. Dimensions of student-faculty interaction, pedagogical opportunities.
Payne (2019).	Persona Narratives. Dimensions of disengagement and personal behaviour (self-efficacy).

For example, a student persona was developed that enjoyed their course but strongly disliked group work. They were returning to college after many years and wanted 'good grades' but felt group work would negatively affect their grade. This aligned to the intense student typology identified by Coates (2007) but included some contextual information on the individual student experience and circumstances that facilitated empathy.

Teacher personas were developed based on a survey with over 246 teaching staff (see Figure 2). The main challenges academic staff faced were encouraging attendance, and participation in class and group work. The teacher personas were based on these challenges. In addition, different personas were developed from teacher demographics – new and experienced teachers, those with different disciplines, large classes etc. For example, a teacher who was new to teaching and spent a lot of time designing useful content for their class to encourage engagement but could not get the students to participate in class.

Figure 2: Staff perspectives of the teaching and learning challenges regarding student engagement.
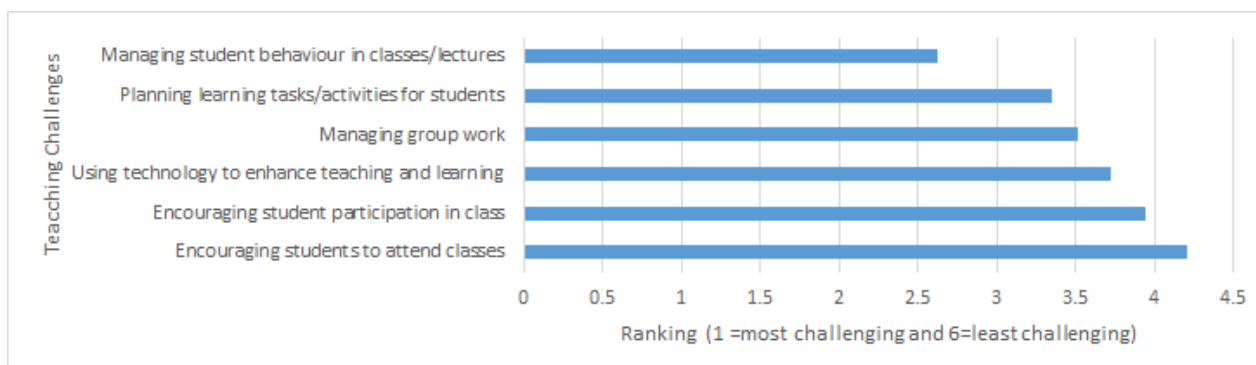
These personas were then digitized; a written narrative and an audio recording was combined with a picture of the student (see Figure 3 and Appendix). Students could watch a video and listen to the person speaking or read the text. This ensured the persona was represented in multiple ways to appeal to various student preferences. Following the video, the students were then asked to advise on the key issues and what a teacher could do to enhance their teaching to address the issues outlined in the personas. Students could do this through a form displayed at the end of the video. Students could also tell a story about their own learning and teaching experience.

Figure 3: Example of digitized persona interface.

3.3 Reflexivity.

The researchers met regularly to discuss the project and its ongoing implementation. In our discussions we acknowledged that the research highlights the potential of personas to be subject to bias based on their creators' assumptions and beliefs (Pruitt & Grudin, 2003; Salminen, 2018). However, the discussion evolved to highlight that the research project and the development of personas was a continuous process and that the data gathered from the narrative inquiry would support the development of additional personas to enable a wider representation of student and teacher diversity. To address initial bias a grounded approach was used, and the development of personas was based on literature and primary research, however much of the research was conducted over a decade ago. Since then, the student profile and educational landscape has significantly changed. Therefore, this was seen as a limiting factor of the research.

In developing these personas, the researchers were conscious of representing the student population within the institute. Guided by the literature and knowledge of the student population, the pictures and profiles of each persona were carefully considered, and a diverse range of genders, ethnicities and ages were included to ensure students could relate to the personas and their stories.

3.4 Future research.

The project was initially to be rolled out in March 2020 and was designed to be hosted in the student forum within the college, situated near the students' union, over a period of two days. The objective was to work with students in their own spaces rather than inviting them to teacher or formal spaces. However, due to the pandemic, the project had to be digitized and was rolled out in Spring 2021. Although it provided the project team with opportunities to include personas relating to the digital learning experience, there were several challenges. In Spring 2021 students were suffering from survey fatigue as well as fatigue from the demands of the academic year. The response rate was low; however, this was a qualitative research study and so it was felt that the richness of data and lessons learned were valuable to the research regarding student engagement and future iterations of the research. We feel that the timing and location of the project impacted the response rate.

Furthermore, many initiatives that involve students in decision-making around their teaching are

in formal teaching spaces, governance structures and academic systems – not within informal student spaces. We feel that initiatives that take place within the student space provide more potential for authentic contributions and partnership.

The project team plan to trial the initiative in the initial proposed format (face-to-face and hosted in a student space) in Spring 2022 and will compare the findings and response rate. However, we are continuing to adopt the use the personas in a variety of ways to incorporate the student voice into teaching and learning initiatives:

- Incorporating personas into the curriculum design process to encourage programme teams to develop programmes based on students' interests, personal circumstances, and future interests.

- When providing professional development to teaching staff by using personas for activity-based sessions to discuss the multifaceted elements of engaging diverse types of students and how we can design teaching and learning initiatives to address these.

- Students often experience difficulty in areas such as group work and transitioning to online learning. We propose to embed personas within everyday teaching so students can understand each other's individual experiences, discuss these, and learn how to adopt practices that prepare them for more complex learning situations such as group work.

- Updating the personas based on the findings from the initial pilot so they are more contemporary and represent a wider diversity of students.

We see significant potential for personas as a model to support student dialogue and partnership. Due to the open and authentic nature of the study we feel that the information gathered in the second iteration of the project will identify additional dimensions regarding student-teacher engagement which has not been reported in the literature heretofore. This will lead to the development of further personas to support many teaching and learning initiatives in HE.

4.   Acknowledgements.

5.   References.

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