



**A REVIEW OF THE SCHOLARSHIP ON ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The scholarship on engagement offers a wide variety of benefits to research, teaching and learning in higher education. It is observed within the powerful discourse of engagement that learners have gained enormous experiences from direct interaction with society. In addition, decades of research regarding its positive influences on young people reinforced the paramount of learning via engaging in nation's education landscape. This article describes the vital of engagement that has challenged scholars to broader their perspectives on its evolving intellectual discourse in education. Finally, it proposes engagement as crucial pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education. It is expected that future direction of nation's education could integrate engagement in research and teaching in the current education ecosystem.*

**Keywords:** Engagement, Higher Education, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education, Intellectual Discourse, Crucial Pedagogy.

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The progress in science and technology is disrupting how students learn in school, changing the education landscape, casting a further affirmation on its significance in the age of technological revolution. Further, the fourth industrial revolution (IR4) casts a brevity of today's rapidly changing world, generating a plethora of innovation in society, including Fintech, Bitcoins, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning, and The Internet of Things. The prevailing technological breakthrough challenges the education consumers to maximize from massive online courses, online tools for learning, digital learning environment and e-learning (Baek, 2017; Aldowah et al., 2017). Given this scenario in the education ecosystem,

it is clear that the current century is experiencing a major learning landscape transformation. Hence, there is a need for today's education to strive for excellence with teaching and research approaches that are overarching and engaging in a dynamic learning setting.

Yet, in the middle of embracing those profound technological changes in today's education, there is a fundamental scholarship, which is inconsistently addressed by key players. Notably, when attempting to design curricula, pedagogies, teaching and learning spaces, the vital scholarship of engagement in education is often ignored. This extremely insular view is often sensationalized by the publication of an article that begins with 'the dearth of classroom' – assumed to be the future of education in Asia (Baek, 2017), and further exaggerated by nation rush for classroom to go digital (Tariq, Rajaendram, & Chonghui, 2017). Although, those sentiments have challenged educators to revise their views on education, yet the credibility of such publication remained exuberant, due to a much grander idea about education. In this regard, and contrary to the one-sided technocratic view on education, studies on its fundamental in society has recognised university engagement as the pillar of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Alperovitz, Dubb, & Howard, 2008). While we do not deny technology to revolutionize the education sector, - perhaps because we have seen it aids learning processes, we maintain that a broader practice of engagement should be facilitated by key players, for a better world, policy implementation and social payoff. Given this picture, we are left with one inescapable observation on the topic: learners shall gain enormous benefits from engagement as nation redesigns its agenda to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education ecosystem.

Within this observation, we review the scholarship on engagement that offers a wide variety of benefits to research, teaching and learning in higher education. It is observed within the powerful discourse of engagement that learners have gained enormous experiences from direct interaction with society. In addition, decades of research on its positive influences on young people reinforced the paramount of learning via engaging in nation's education landscape. It is under this context of powerful intellectual discourse that this article fits in. It describes the vital of engagement that has challenged scholars to broader their perspectives on its evolving intellectual discourse in education. Finally, it proposes engagement as crucial pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education. It is expected that future direction of nation's education could integrate engagement in research and teaching in the current education ecosystem.

## **2.0 THE SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT**

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, the issue in today's education is much more than to revolutionize the means of teaching and learning. Rather at the heart of learning is engagement, and in principle, it influences the process of teaching, as it has never been important than it is today. Related debates, visions, and scholarship have challenged scholars to broader their perspectives on courses design, and learning opportunities for students (Cushing, Bates, & van Vliet, 2013); equality, and literacy in education among indigenous people (Mohamad & Mohd Ali, 2017); critical pedagogy of community development in higher education (Missingham, 2017). Further, it has revolutionized today's intellectual discourse on universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by promoting capacity building and outreaching mission to society (Alperovitz et al., 2008). In addition, a slew of cooperation and participation from academics in volunteerism have provided an international forum for cross-disciplinary exchange of insights and ideas about society (Sin, 2009). Also, this emphasis on engagement has been the core principle in rural research, as Chambers (2014) said that 'the more significant principles of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) concern the behavior and attitudes of outsider facilitators, including not

rushing, handing over the stick, and being self-critically aware' (p. 1253). In addition to Chamber's analysis on researcher's engagement with rural population in development agenda, the benefits of engagement in environmental research are neatly documented by Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouimet (2011), shedding light on the contribution of local knowledge, cultures, and peoples' inputs in anthropological research. Regarding what it means to the people in the forest, Muhammad Adha Shaleh (2017a) puts it this way:

*the idea of community engagement in forest conservation activities brings forest people closer to the forest by utilising their knowledge, constituting the acceptance and recognition of their heritage land, history, livelihoods, traditions, norms and the rules that dictate their behaviours toward the environment (p. 126).*

Aside from its range of benefits to researchers, engagement has also presented opportunities to students as they participated in service learning projects (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). It is highly advocated by academics to increase young people engagement in their communities for a sustainable society (Raill & Hollander, 2006; Krasny et al., 2015). With these positive results from community engagement, Shaleh (2018) concurs that the 21<sup>st</sup> century education should go beyond the mastery of reading, mathematics, computer skills, as he emphasises humanity, compassion, empathy, socio ecological and cultural intelligence. Further, he corroborates that community engagement has the vision to transform education into experiential inquiry process – a learning by immersing that allows students to acquire knowledge in a real world (Shaleh, 2018). Thus, the scholarship on engagement boldly calling for the learning of the following embedded social structures: economic, politics, environment, faith and culture.

In contrast to the reductionist focus on 'technical revolution' that reverberates its impact on today's education, learning engagement and its associated mechanism nurture students, promote collaboration between academics, students, communities and change makers. It is more than just lecturing and disseminating knowledge to students. Notably, an instance to attest this emerging significance of engagement in education is cultural immersion programme that has catered platform to students, for a deep social conversation, via focus group activities, interviews, and observation (Shaleh, 2017b). The value of these activities is increasingly 'appreciated' with the passing of time and if it is properly done enables more exploratory ways to enhance teaching and research, learning and acquiring knowledge, making a meaningful social engagement with society (Shaleh, 2017c). Therefore, students' participation in civic programmes and their desires for a sustainable future provokes a fresh pedagogical design in education. The challenge is, however, to view education as richly benefiting students and developing them into responsible, global citizens, holding on to right values and attributes, so that they can contribute to humanity. A few years ago, Boyer (2016) conceives the vision this way:

*I have this growing conviction that what's also needed is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life as we move toward century twenty-one. Increasingly, I'm convinced that ultimately, the scholarship of engagement also means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other (p. 27).*

Based on the above-mentioned significances of engagement, and its importance in education, we call for an engaging pedagogy that teaches students to observe challenges and issues encountered in society. For example, community engagement can be done through community partnership in environmental awareness program, in which teachers, parents, students, school staff, head of the village, social entrepreneurs, and university students, all participate in its project design. This type of learning can provide students with the following soft skills: community organizing, community mapping, consensus building, participatory research, facilitating focus group discussions, and participant observation. Those skills acquired in community setting are one of the few critical competencies being built for 21<sup>st</sup> century students - critical thinking, cross-cultural awareness, civic and ecological literacies.

In retrospective, we contend that expanding the mission from merely passive engagement to active interactions, reciprocity and mutual respect with society, is a long-term goal. Yet, we expect a new twist in the education sector, at least among current researchers to initiate interactions and partnerships with 'the outside world.' By creating more synergies between research and public service missions, researchers are moving towards community-based learning environment, in which it becomes strategically defined and actively engaged, in addition to scholarly expression. That kind of synergy is best described by Sandmann (2008) when he said:

*as the scholarship of engagement becomes a concept that more higher education institutions grapple with, the next punctuation could be driven by a vigorous research agenda. Some of the elements needed for such an agenda, such as moving beyond descriptive, narrative works to more critical, empirical research as well as meta and policy analysis (p. 100).*

### **3.0 FUTURE DIRECTION**

This article represents partially the vital of engagement in education. We admit that the scholarship on engagement presented above needs verification (for future research). For that reason, and for a broader and extended review, we suggest a similar analysis in relevant literature, including some peer reviewed articles and conference presentation (Sobel, 2004; Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Zakariya, 2014; Ma & Tandon, 2014) and several excellent books, including the ones written by Chambers, 2014; Jacob et al., 2015; Brock and Symaco, 2015.

In many realities in today's education, students are expecting for a holistic teaching to prepare their future, and educators have realized it. In recent years, when profound changes are played out by technological disruption, we seen responses have been the publishing works of individual scholars on how technology disrupts the education sector. This sort of recognition is only partly significant to the entire goals of education. This is why we are not incline to its futuristic view as we believe that redesigning our education in this brave new world is to reinstate intellectuals' commitment to popularize the scholarship of engagement. However, we observe from today's social reality that all revolution in the economy is revolving around a network of platforms. That is the first to establish a platform has advantage and perhaps could lead to enormous platforms for others. So, a broader engagement between schools, teachers, parents, students, academics, entrepreneurs, industries, and think tanks, complements the objective of today's education. For us, today's age is about moving the education away from a mere focus on individual competitiveness, economic interest, and short-term goals, to collective abilities, and social responsibilities, invoking passion to commit for a common good in the long term. In principle, this vision of education will have to start with the new

pedagogical experiment, which is engaging, listening, embracing cultural diversities, and respect other cultures. With this perspective in mind, we are of the opinion that ‘being’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education: for scholars, it means that the overall work of academy should be in participatory styles and vigorously helmed in the broader public discourse; for students, it means nursing good characteristics, creative thinking, empathy, and diverse form of social, ecological, and cultural intelligence; for think tanks, the goals and objectives in their research should be firmly rooted in social realities – the ‘annals’ of any nation. Further reality in education lies in its role in disseminating knowledge to learners. In line with this reality, we envision future education in terms of how the process of teaching benefits students and society that they belong to. For that reason alone, a multi-disciplinary approach to research and teaching warrants an attention, and perhaps, we will address it again in the future.

Indeed, there is a lot of work to be done as far as collaborative research, community partnership, student centred learning, are a concern, and as far as future investment is a concern. We need to redesign it by engaging with society in the market places of ideas in order to get a different style, profile and obviously variegated perspectives. So, how are we all going to do about this issue? The crucial step as we have mentioned briefly before, we have proposed engagement as crucial pedagogy in the current education ecosystem. Why is it vital? This method of learning has *two* interlocking benefits in education and research. First, students can relate in their own way rather than feeling left out in conversation when the traditional lecture style takes place in the classroom. For researchers, we expect them to benefit from research projects that are based on local context, with local’s aspiration, plan, perspective and vision. Although we acknowledge a broader context in research, perhaps for the reason of cross-fertilization of knowledge, future research should place on, first, local heritage, faith, and culture.

The impact of engagement on those learning communities, and those from teaching or research people has yet to be fully discovered. Hence, a deeper discussion through participatory approaches is warranted to explore ideas, insights, and theoretical framework from other fields, including Sociology, Anthropology, critical pedagogy, community development, educational psychology, and theology. It is therefore convenient to acknowledge that the vital of engagement in higher education is evolving to multi-disciplinary field for academic research.

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