



<b>Title</b>	Creating a safe climate for active learning and student engagement: an example from an introductory social work module
<b>Authors(s)</b>	Ní Raghallaigh, Muireann, Cunniffe, Rosemary
<b>Publication date</b>	2012-06-19
<b>Publication information</b>	Ní Raghallaigh, Muireann, and Rosemary Cunniffe. "Creating a Safe Climate for Active Learning and Student Engagement: An Example from an Introductory Social Work Module." Routledge (Taylor & Francis), June 19, 2012. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.694103">https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.694103</a> .
<b>Publisher</b>	Routledge (Taylor & Francis)
<b>Item record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5436">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5436</a>
<b>Publisher's statement</b>	This is an electronic version of an article published in Teaching in Higher Education, 2013 Vol. 18, No. 1, 93- 105. Teaching in Higher Education is available online at: <a href="http://www.tandfonline.com//doi/abs/10.1080/13562517.2012.694103">www.tandfonline.com//doi/abs/10.1080/13562517.2012.694103</a>
<b>Publisher's version (DOI)</b>	10.1080/13562517.2012.694103

Downloaded 2026-05-01 23:45:07

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd\_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

# Creating a safe climate for active learning and student engagement: an example from an introductory social work module

M. Ní Raghallaigh and R. Cunniffe

School of Applied Social Science, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland 5

This article explores the experiences of students who participated in a series of seminars that employed active learning methodologies. The study on which the article is based involved two parts. First, students completed a questionnaire after each seminar, resulting in 468 questionnaires. Second, nine students participated in a focus group where the questionnaire findings were explored. The research findings suggest that the students were highly engaged and that the mix of 'doing', 'observing' and 'reflecting' contributed to their engagement. However, in addition, the students' perspectives suggested that the learning environment in which the seminars took place was of particular importance. Overall, the study highlights that while active learning methodologies contribute to student engagement, the atmosphere in which the methodologies are used is also of central importance. Therefore, as well as paying attention to the cognitive aspects of learning, teachers need to consider the affective domains.

Keywords: student engagement; active learning; student learning; learning environment; student experiences

## Introduction

Recent literature on student learning raises questions about the adequacy of relying on traditional ways of teaching (Fink 2003; Steuter and Doyle 2010; Zepke and Leach 2010a,b). There is a suggestion that traditional approaches to teaching in higher education do not take into account what is known about how students learn (Laurillard 2002; Umbrach and Wawrzynski 2005). Some literature suggests that what is required is a major shift in orientation – from one that is teacher – led to one that is focused on student learning (O'Neill and McMahon 2005). This, combined with research on the student's experience of higher education, points to some clear indicators of what creates a positive learning experience for undergraduate students (Case 2007, 2008; Comeaux 2010). Research also points to the role of the teacher/lecturer as critical in creating a climate which facilitates student engagement and learning (Russell and Slater 2011).

## Student engagement and active learning methodologies

While much has been written about 'deep' versus 'surface' approaches to learning (e.g. Rollnick et al. 2008), Mann suggests moving away from these and employing

quite a different perspective (Mann 2001, 17). She suggests reframing students' experiences of learning in terms of experiences of alienation or engagement which, in her view, offer a broader analysis of the student learning experience. While alienation and engagement are complex constructs, definitions have been provided by various authors. Mann (2001, 8) describes alienation as 'the state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved'. For Case (2008, 120), alienation implies disconnection in the context of a desired or expected relationship. Engagement on the other hand involves the presence of a connection or relationship (Case 2008, 324). Some authors have suggested that, when students are engaged, the experience of learning may be associated with enjoyment and passion as well as with a sense of fulfilment and personal development (Bryson and Hand 2007; Case 2007). In addition, engagement is likely to result in an improvement in student learning (Bryson and Hand 2007). Case argues that adopting an alienation and engagement framework means that success or failure in relation to student learning is examined in the wider socio-cultural context and it includes the 'affective' dimensions of learning (Bryson and Hand 2007, 132). Importantly, she sees that positive experiences for students involve 'new relationships with people' as opposed to an approach to learning.

As far back as 1995, Barr and Tagg (1995, 21) suggested that that a major paradigm shift was taking place, away from the emphasis on providing instruction (the teaching paradigm) to providing learning (the learning paradigm). This shift from viewing students as 'passive vessels', where the teacher controls the learning activities, recognises instead that 'students must be active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge' (Barr and Tagg 1995, 21). Such a student focus demands that teachers take on a new role, primarily as 'designers of learning environments' (Barr and Tagg 1995, 24), rather than as lecturers who simply use the 'stand and deliver' teaching method (Burke and Ray 2008, 573). This new paradigm envisages students as empowered, with personal relationships among students and between teachers and students and cooperative learning in class (Fink 2003). In recent years, a growing body of literature and research has recognised the value of active learning experiences for students (e.g. Clouder 2009; Comeaux 2010; Steuter and Doyle 2010; Zepke and Leach 2010a,b). For example, in one study it was concluded that students were more engaged 'where faculty employ active and collaborative learning techniques' (Umbrach and Wawrzynski 2005, 165).

Fink (2003, 104) conceptualises active learning as involving several components, other than students simply getting information and ideas. First, active learning involves experiences, including both 'doing' and 'observing'. Second, it involves reflection, both

on what one is learning and on how one is learning. Through reflection - either alone or with others - students make meaning of experiences and ideas. Fink (2003, 111) suggests that teachers should expand on the opportunities for students to engage in 80 experiential learning. Role-playing, simulations and dramatisations are examples of what he classifies as 'rich' learning experiences because they allow students to simultaneously achieve several kinds of significant learning (Fink 2003, 111).

### **Current study**

In the current study, we examined students' perceptions of participating in a series of seminars in University College Dublin in 2010. The curriculum design for the seminars was informed by Fink's (2003) conceptualisation. The seminars were part of an optional module for students in the third (final) year of a Social Science Degree programme and for graduate students on a one year transitional Higher Diploma in Social Policy. The module, Social Work in Practice, was a recommended module for students hoping to pursue postgraduate training in social work, but was also chosen by others who did not intend to train as social workers. A total of 95 students registered for the module, which involved 12 hours of lectures (which were not the focus of this study) as well as 12 hours of seminars. Each student attended six 2-hour seminars over six consecutive weeks. The number of students in each seminar varied from 13 to 25. Most of the students were used to attend lectures in large groups of anywhere between 80 and 200 students. The Social Work in Practice module was very different in that it placed a focus on small group teaching. Each seminar was facilitated by one of four teachers, all of whom were qualified social workers with experience of teaching at third level. These teachers included the two authors.

The primary objective of the seminars was to enable students to begin learning basic social work interviewing skills. The seminars also aimed to give students a basic understanding of social work practice. They provided students with the opportunity to discuss social work practice, try out various skills, reflect on their experiences and receive feedback from their peers. A variety of teaching methods and tools were used, including short PowerPoint presentations, facilitated group discussions, brainstorming, role plays, flipcharts, worksheets, peer feedback, case studies and DVDs. A developmental approach was adopted whereby the tasks in which students engaged became more complex as the weeks went by. It was made explicit that teachers valued students' opinions and thoughts and were not looking for 'right' or 'wrong' answers. We hoped that this would have the effect of freeing up students to try things out, to give opinions and to reflect together on particular topics or issues. We aimed to

create an environment that was 'safe' for the students, one that encouraged and facilitated them to engage in 'cooperative learning' (Bryson and Hand 2007, 353) where they could learn with and from their peers.

Attendance at the seminars was mandatory, with 18% of the Module's grade being allocated to full attendance. The teachers explained this to students in terms of first, the need for continuity in their learning experience as a member of a group and second, the fact that the written assignment would be based on what they had learned in class over the six weeks. Overall, attendance rates were high with 80.0% (n\_76) of the students attending all six seminars, 10.5% (n\_10) attending only five, 3.1% (n\_3) attending only four, 2.1% (n\_2) attending only one and 4.2% (n\_4) attending none. Over the course of the six seminars, this gives a total attendance rate of 92.6% (n\_520).

In the research study itself, the students' perceptions and experiences of participating in the seminars were explored using a mixed-method approach. Ethical approval was granted by the University Ethics Committee. Part 1 of the study involved questionnaires which explored students' experiences of learning basic social work skills, focusing in particular on what the students learned each week and what facilitated or hindered their learning. The questionnaires included a mixture of qualitative and quantitative questions. They were distributed at the end of each seminar by the teachers and took about ten minutes to complete. In order to ensure that students did not feel under pressure to participate, the teachers busied themselves with other tasks while the questionnaires were being completed and students were requested to leave the questionnaires in a box near the door rather than handing them back to the teacher. Of the total attendance of 520 over the six seminars, the participation rate in Part 1 of the research was 90.0%, resulting in a total of 468 completed questionnaires. In Part 2 of the study nine students volunteered to participate in a focus group which explored the questionnaire responses in more depth. A postgraduate research was employed to facilitate the focus groups and to transcribe the data that were collected.

### **Findings and discussion**

While much of the literature has focused on the alienation that students can experience, our research sheds light on a module which students found 'engaging'. The first question on the questionnaires provided evidence of this. This question provided the students with a list of adjectives (see Table 1). The adjectives consisted of a mix of 'positive' and 'negative' words and were presented as they are in the box, not in any particular order. The students were asked to choose the word or words

that reflected their experience of that week's seminar.

In 85.0% (n\_398) of the total number of questionnaires (n\_468), the word 'engaging' was chosen. Another similar word \_ 'interesting' \_ was chosen in 81.4% (n\_381) of the questionnaires. In contrast, the corresponding percentages for the words 'boring' and 'uninteresting' were 1.5% (n\_7) and 0.2% (n\_1), respectively. Analysis of the questionnaire responses and the focus group data suggested that the active learning components suggested by Fink (2003) \_ 'doing' experiences, 'observing' experiences and reflection \_ were valued by the students and contributed to their engagement. The students' perceptions in relation to each of these components will now be discussed in turn.

### 'Doing' experiences

Fink (2003, 105) describes 'doing' as 'any learning activity where the learners actually do that which we want them to learn how to do'. Given that we wanted the students to learn about social work in practice and the skills involved, the 'doing' experiences were concentrated around engaging with clients and practising basic social work skills. These components involved discussions and brain storming in relation to various topics (e.g. communication, values); exercises to practise listening skills; discussions of case examples; and role plays. The role plays \_ which happened during weeks 3, 4 and 6 \_ represented a key part of the learning experience. They gave students an opportunity to practise a variety of social work skills ranging from basic skills (such as listening and asking open questions) initially, to more complex skills (such the paraphrasing, summarising and clarifying) in later weeks.

### Table 1. List of adjectives.

Engaging Boring Interesting Informative  
Challenging Easy Uninteresting Unhelpful  
Uninformative Enjoyable Useful Repetitive

Students were given a case scenario involving a particular issue. These evolved from familiar scenarios (such as a student thinking of leaving university) to more complex and abstract ones (such as an elderly man wanting to live at home instead of in a nursing home). The students worked in threes, with one person taking on the role of the professional, the second taking on the role of the client and the third acting as observer. The questionnaire responses in relation to the role plays suggested that these were engaging activities that helped to give the students a flavour of the skills needed in social work. Many of the students remarked on the fact that these exercises helped them to put the theory into practice. For example, in noting the differences

between this module and previous learning experiences, the following comments were made about the seminars:

*More interactive and role plays. Opportunity to practice the theory.*

*More fulfilling and informative. Other modules are academically based but this introduced us to role play and as close to social work as was possible without being on work placement.*

Within the traditional lecture environment many of the students seemed to struggle to understand the connection between theory and practice. This highlighted the importance of 'doing' exercises, such as role plays. While in theory using open questions, paraphrasing and listening seemed straightforward, the students found the reality very different. They were challenged by the role plays in a way that they didn't expect:

*I realised that interviewing is harder than it looks.*

*Sounds easy! But in practice, very difficult.*

Indeed, the challenging nature of these exercises may have contributed to student engagement (Russell and Slater 2011, 12). The discrepancy between the imagined reality and the actual reality seemed to help to engage the students. They became even more connected with the topic as they attempted to meet the challenge by learning and improving their skills through practice. One student commented that the role play was:

*[. . .] helpful but challenging. Enjoyed being put on the spot as made me realise what it would be like in a real situation.*

As well as being connected with the topic, the students demonstrated a connection with their peers through the feedback that peers gave them on their role playing. While a very small number of students commented negatively on the experience of receiving this feedback, the vast majority were very positive about it:

*Shows how you were going wrong and how you could do better and where you were right.*

*Interesting to hear the feedback from others in the group when I was advisor. Had a different image. I thought questions I was asking may not have been as correct as peers thought.*

Such comments suggest that the students were engaged rather than alienated. They remembered what had been said and appeared to be reflecting on these remarks.

### 'Observing' experiences

The students engaged in two types of 'observing' experiences which involved them watching others engaged in activities that were relevant to the topics being taught (Fink 2003). As previously described, in each role play one student acted as observer and provided feedback to his or her peers. In addition, students watched several

DVD clips of students and professionals engaged in counselling or social work practice. In a context where direct observation of professional practice was not possible, these ‘indirect’ observations proved very valuable. In their comments about the practice that they observed in the DVDs, the students were energised and passionate about social work. Such energy and passion are two important components of engagement that are identified by Ramsden (2003) and Cree (2007), respectively. The students seemed particularly engaged by a fly-on-the-wall documentary of child protection social work in England:

*Great to watch real stories / situations / problems etc. Was very interesting and engaging. I learned how difficult it is to be a social worker and also the challenges they are faced with and difficulties, but also how rewarding it can be at times.*

As is evident from the above quotation, students became more aware of the complexity of social work and the challenging nature of the social work role by watching the practice unfold in the documentary. There was an appreciation of the reality of social work practice that enthused and engaged the students. This was different from reading textbooks or listening to lecturers describe what social work practice is about:

*Good to see real examples and not just abstract examples. This was great. First hand visual information just gives you a proper sense whether you'd really enjoy it.*

There is of course a danger that observation could in itself become a passive exercise. To ensure that this did not happen, we gave the students worksheets to complete while they watched DVDs and while they observed their peers doing role plays. These worksheets drew their attention to the particular learning that the teachers had in mind. For example, in watching a DVD of a counsellor in action, the worksheets asked the students to note the different skills and values that were demonstrated and also how these skills and values affected the client. Thus, the worksheets gave the students an opportunity to engage analytically with the content of the DVDs. As one student stated in relation to one of the DVD clips:

*Made us really think about the different perspectives.*

In addition, the worksheets also provided the students with a tool for reflection, as will be discussed in the next section.

### Reflecting

Fink (2003, 110) suggests that without reflection students will learn something but they will not ‘make that learning fully meaningful to themselves’. Throughout the seminars an emphasis was placed on reflection. The students were encouraged to reflect on both what they learnt and how they learnt (Fink 2003). Primarily, this was

done through some allocated individual reflection time at the end of each seminar. Rather than simply asking students to reflect, students were set a number of specific reflective questions. Students were encouraged to keep what they wrote so that it could be incorporated into their assignment. The teachers did not ask what they had written and did not collect the reflections.

To give an example of the reflective questions, after the fourth seminar (involving a role play), we asked the students to write responses to the following two reflective questions: (1) How was the experience for you of being the student/student advisor/observer? (2) What did you learn from this exercise? In the research, when asked to rate how helpful this exercise was on a five-point scale (very helpful, helpful, neither helpful nor unhelpful, unhelpful, very unhelpful), 88.5% (n = 69) of the students who completed the questionnaires indicated that they found the reflective exercise either helpful or very helpful. For some, it helped them to think about the role play, including 'taking stock of feedback'. For others, it helped to identify how they were feeling. Others felt that the exercise helped them to remember. Some of their comments included the following:

*Good to really go over the material and really think about what has been said.*

*Helped to focus on how I was feeling during exercise and the impact of this on process.*

In the various seminars, discussions and worksheets also helped to aide reflection. In discussions, students heard other people's views, something which often encouraged reflection, especially if the views of others were different from their own. As such, participants reflected alone and with others (Fink 2003). The students repeatedly described the group discussions as 'helpful' or 'very helpful' learning experiences. Their comments often referred to the collaborative and reflective elements of such discussions. In essence, these experiences helped the students to 'become more adept at meaning making' (Fink 2003, 106). In relation to group discussions, one student stated that they were a way to:

*[. . .] get others' ideas/perspectives [. . .] working in synergy. Helps get you thinking.*

In addition, the worksheets that the students completed during DVDs and role plays included key reflective questions. Again, the feedback on using these was very positive and suggested that reflection took place:

*Kept focus [. . .] helped me think [. . .] ask myself questions.*

*Helped reflect and be aware of what we were watching and to connect it with past seminars/lectures.*

Overall, the students seemed to highly value the reflective elements of the seminar. For many of them, these elements represented a new form of learning. They engaged well. One participant commented on the overall emphasis on reflection within the

seminars. She clearly found the approach valuable:

*Looks like what they are trying to bring into it, kind of reflective learning because that's really something you'll remember. Otherwise, the theory, you just sit in a lecture, they ream it all out and [ . . . ] you'll remember it for the exam but you won't really remember it ever again, whereas this is [ . . . ] much better, it is more practical.*

#### Various ways of 'doing', 'observing' and 'reflecting'

By including elements of 'doing', 'observing' and 'reflecting', along with more traditional teaching of information and ideas, the seminars offered considerable variety for students. Cree (2005, 63) states that a 'mix of learning tasks' is needed to maintain students' interest. In addition, students need opportunities to 'try out their learning in practice' using case studies, exercises and role plays (Cree 2005, 63). In this way, they achieved what Fink (2003) has termed 'significant learning'. Students were constantly kept engaged by the variety of teaching methodologies and by the fact that these methodologies placed great emphasis on interaction and participation. One student commented:

*It was really informative, never boring and there was a wide variety of medium in learning.*

The emphasis on variety meant that each individual seminar could appeal to a wider range of students. The evaluations showed that while one student might not find a particular group discussion helpful, another might have the opposite experience, as is evident from the following two quotations in relation to a particular group discussion on values:

*Didn't see the point, very straightforward, nothing to discuss.*

*Made us think of how we would feel in different situations which is important to be aware of self (self awareness).*

Overall, the variety of interactive learning exercises emerged as a key ingredient in establishing a participatory learning environment:

*The combination of the tutor, slides, role play and flip chart all helped me learn. Others in the class giving opinions is also great, they may think in a way you would not have.*

#### Creating a climate for active learning

In analysing the data it became evident that students commented on more than just the content of the seminars. They repeatedly commented on the classroom atmosphere and the positive impact this had on their participation and engagement. Thus, while the components outlined by Fink (2003) are key to student engagement, this current research suggested that the climate in which learning occurred was also of central importance.

As 'designers of learning environments' (Barr and Tagg 1995, 24), we (the

authors) and the other teachers on the Social Work in Practice module paid particular attention to our disposition as teachers and to the learning environment that we were creating. We placed an emphasis on allowing students to feel comfortable enough to interact with each other and to try things out in practice. The students' responses suggested that these elements created a positive climate for learning and, as such, were the very things that facilitated them to 'do', 'observe' and 'reflect' (Fink 2003). Thus, it became apparent that the affective domain was a key factor in students' positive experience and engagement.

As was described at the outset, Case (2008, 324) described engagement as involving the presence of a connection or a relationship. In creating a positive climate for learning, we paid attention to two interrelated components: the connection between students and the connection that students had with their teachers. The lack of connection between students that was evident at the beginning of the module was recognised as a potential obstacle to participation. Therefore, we used several simple strategies to attempt to quickly establish relationships between the students. These included getting students to introduce themselves to one another in the initial weeks, asking them to wear name badges, and ensuring that students worked with different members of the group rather than sticking with their friends. When asked about the exercise where they introduced themselves to a classmate, 80% (n = 68) of the respondents regarded this as helpful or very helpful. Their comments included:

*Easier to communicate, interact.*

*Makes you feel comfortable with classmates.*

Throughout the evaluations references were made to getting to know other students over time and how this helped students to be able to participate. For example, one participant stated:

*With regards to class size, I found a small group to be better as it was easier to get to know everyone better and also with less people you got more of a chance to become involved.*

In turn, these connections with peers meant that students engaged comfortably in group exercises and discussions. As mentioned previously, the students consistently identified group work as helping their learning. This was a very strong theme in the data. For example, students stated:

*Group discussion was key as other people's views added to my knowledge.*

*The small group discussions just allowed me to understand and clarify things better than in a big lecture hall.*

In relation to the second set of connections – those between students and teachers – we consciously attempted to break down any perceived barriers between ourselves

and our students by trying to get to know the students and by chatting informally before and after class. There was a strong emphasis on valuing students' opinions and their inputs throughout the seminars and not just coming up with the 'right' answers. These efforts were noted by the students who made reference to the personal attributes of the teachers, using words such as 'approachable', 'accommodating', 'helpful', 'nice', and 'lovely'. One student stated that the teacher's 'clear explanations and easy chat' helped her learning. Others also referred to the links between the teacher's style and their ability to engage with the content and with other students. Reference was also made to the enthusiasm of the teachers, something which Bryson and Hand (2007) refer to as 'a prerequisite for student engagement':

*Lecturer was very engaged. Felt like she was interested in what we had to say.*

*Again, very engaging seminar and the lecturer has established an open rapport with the class which makes it an enjoyable learning experience.*

As the above quotation illustrates, these efforts to establish connections contributed to the atmosphere in the classroom which, judging from the student's comments, seemed to aid participation and hence engagement. It was evident that for many of the students, attending and participating in the seminars was an affective experience, as well as a cognitive one (Griffiths 2009, 74). How they felt in class impacted on their participation, on their interaction with peers and with the teachers, and, ultimately, on their learning. Sometimes, students' lack of confidence can act as a barrier to classroom participation. Students may fear that their answers will be incorrect or that their questions will expose their lack of knowledge. Yet, in these seminars, it seemed that students felt able to participate, even if only through 'a few words'. For example, one student stated the following after the first week's seminar:

*Really enjoyed the experience of getting to know others on the course in an unthreatening environment. I learnt so much more in this relaxed environment. Thanks.*

In reflecting on the seminar series as a whole, other students talked about their feelings within the classroom, and specifically that they felt comfortable and able to engage as a result. The role of the teacher was also highlighted:

*She [the teacher] really practiced . . . that kind of inclusiveness and non-judgemental and that kind of thing came across and made an impact where eventually people who were maybe shy in the beginning, people eventually kind of came across and were more open when you know, because you are very vulnerable when you open up . . . so it takes a certain amount of trust to get to that stage, but she did actually achieve that. So I think the facilitators themselves really have a great impact on how the seminars will work.*

*I found [the seminars] really interesting and out of my 3 years in college, this was the class I enjoyed most. I never speak out and in this I felt comfortable enough to say a*

*few words.*

Overall, as well as focusing on 'doing' and 'observing' experiences, and offering opportunities for reflection, the climate created by the teachers emerged as a key ingredient in establishing an interactive and participatory learning environment. Thus, students were engaged rather than alienated.

### **Concluding comments**

Recent literature has highlighted the issue of student alienation (Case 2007; Hockings et al. 2008; Mann 2001, 2005). Alienated students experience themselves as isolated from the group or activity. They are not connected to their lecturer or to their classmates and there is an absence of enjoyment or excitement in relation to their learning (Case 2007). In situations of alienation, there is an emphasis on outcomes rather than on process and there is an emphasis on teachers owning the learning process (Mann 2001). As well as having poorer learning outcomes students who are alienated may be at risk of withdrawing entirely from their course of study (Bryson and Hand 2007).

While it is important to understand why students experience alienation it is equally important to learn from the experience of students who are engaged, yet little research has adopted this focus. Having facilitated the Social Work in Practice seminars for a number of years, and having received very positive feedback from students, we were interested in what contributed to student engagement. As such, the research that has been discussed in this article was a small study of self-reported student engagement.

The seminars incorporated all three components of Fink's (2003, 123) conceptualisation of active learning: getting information, a range of 'doing' and 'observing' experiences, as well as opportunities for reflection, with peers and alone. However, students stated that another critical component in their experience was the connection with classmates and with the teacher and the overall atmosphere in which learning took place. We agree, therefore, with Ramsden's (1997, 75) claim that the 'emotional aspect of the teacher\_student relationship is more important than the traditional advice on methods and techniques of lecturing would suggest'.

The emphasis in the seminars was very clearly on experiential learning. The students were centre stage, with the stated expectation that they would participate actively in this classroom experience, interacting both with the teacher and with other students, and that this would be a different experience from the traditional lecture situation. Learners were, to use the language of Barr and Tagg (1995, 21), 'the chief agent(s)' in the process. While we recognise that this approach is clearly easier to

adopt in a practice-based discipline, such as social work, group discussions and interactive problem-solving activities could also be considered for more content-heavy subjects.

In designing the series of seminars, we aimed to create a safe, welcoming environment, where students felt free to try things out (in exercises and role plays), to give opinions and to reflect together on particular topics or problems. We encouraged students to share knowledge 'without fear of humiliation and alienation' (Hockings et al. 2008, 195) and to use each other as learning resources. The role of the teacher was primarily one of facilitator – setting the atmosphere, introducing the varied range of learning tasks, in addition to providing specific teaching inputs. The students' responses suggested that, from their perspective, this role was a very important one. Students reported a different connection with their teacher, with a greater balance in the teacher-student relationship, and this shift was welcomed. This, in turn, had the effect of empowering students, which contributed to their engagement and enjoyment of the seminars. Admittedly, in some subject areas, teachers may need to place more emphasis on giving input to students, especially where complex factual information is involved. Nonetheless, we argue that teachers in all disciplines could place more of an emphasis on creating a suitable climate for learning, hence enhancing engagement levels.

Our findings indicated clearly that students valued the experience of group work and enjoyed working collaboratively with peers. Thus, there were distinctive conditions for learning that students regarded as contributing positively to the seminar environment. The affective dimension, in conjunction with active and reflective learning, engaged the students. As one student stated, when asked whether the seminar experience differed from previous learning experiences:

*Much more interactive, got involved. Learned much more and will remember what I learned.*

Thus, while our study did not measure learning outcomes, the participants' responses suggested that engagement helped to improve student learning and led to an increased ability to integrate theory into practice. Ultimately, we believe that by using such approaches across a range of disciplines more confident and competent graduates will emerge. Additionally, teaching staff will themselves feel rewarded as they interact with their non-alienated students. A positive cycle of engagement thus ensues.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Dr. Geraldine O'Neill for her helpful suggestions in planning the article and Dr. Hilda Loughran for her comments on an earlier version of the article. A sincere

thanks to the other seminar teachers, Elaine Wilson and Elaine Brennan, who so willingly facilitated the research and to the students who attended the seminars and took part in the study. Thanks also to Denise Nolan who facilitated the focus group and transcribed the data and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

## References

- Barr, R.B., and J. Tagg. 1995. From teaching to learning \_ A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change* 27: 612\_25.
- Bryson, C., and L. Hand. 2007. The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 44, no. 4: 349\_62.
- Burke, L.A., and R. Ray. 2008. Re-setting the concentration levels of students in higher education: An exploratory study. *Teaching in Higher Education* 13, no. 5: 571\_82.
- Case, J. 2007. Alienation and engagement: Exploring students' experiences of studying engineering. *Teaching in Higher Education* 12, no. 1: 119\_33.
- Case, J. 2008. Alienation and engagement: Development of an alternative theoretical framework for understanding student learning. *Higher Education* 55: 321\_32.
- Clouder, L. 2009. Promotion of reflective learning, teaching and assessment through curriculum design. In *Connecting reflective learning, teaching and assessment*, ed. H. Bulpitt and M. Deane, 8\_17. Occasional Paper 10, Health Sciences & Practice Centre, Higher Education Academy.
- Comeaux, P. 2010. Fostering student engagement: Examining the roles of self, history and cultural identity. *The Journal of Effective Teaching* 10, no. 2: 62\_73.
- Cree, V. 2005. Students learning to learn. In *Effective learning and teaching in social policy and social work*, ed. H. Burgess and I. Taylor, 55\_66. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Fink, L.D. 2003. *Creating significant learning experiences. An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Griffiths, S. 2009. Teaching and learning in small groups. In *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education. Enhancing academic practice*. 3rd ed. ed. H. Fry, S. Ketteridge, and S. Marshall, 72\_84. New York: Routledge.
- Hockings, C., S. Cooke, H. Yamashita, S. McGinty, and M. Bowl. 2008. Switched off ? A study of disengagement among computing students at two universities. *Research Papers in Education* 23, no. 2: 191\_201.
- Kuh, G., J. Kinzie, J. Schuh, and E. Whitt. 2006. Student success in college: Assessing the conditions for educational effectiveness. <http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/assessment/essays/kuh-1.19.06.html> (accessed 8 March 2011).
- Laurillard, D. 2002. *Rethinking university teaching. A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Mann, S. 2001. Alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education* 26, no. 1.
- Mann, S. 2005. Alienation in the learning environment: A failure of community. *Studies in Higher Education* 30, no. 1: 43\_55.

O'Neill, G., and T. McMahon. 2005. Student-centred learning: What does it mean for students and lecturers. In *Emerging issues in the practice of university learning and teaching*, ed. G. O'Neill, S. Moore, and B. McMullin, 37\_44. Dublin: AISHE.

Ramsden, P. 1997. *Learning to teach in higher education*, 1st ed. London: Routledge.

Ramsden, P. 2003. *Learning to teach in higher education*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge Falmer.

Rollnick, M., B. Davidowitz, M. Keane, A. Bapoo, and L. Magadla. 2008. Students' learning approach profiles in relation to their university experience and success. *Teaching in Higher Education* 13, no. 1: 29\_42.

Russell, B., and G. Slater 2011. Factors that encourage student engagement: Insights from a case study for 'First Time' students in a New Zealand University. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 8, no. 1.

Steuter, E., and J. Doyle. 2010. Revitalizing the first year class through student engagement and discovery learning. *The Journal of Effective Teaching* 10, no. 1: 66\_78.

Umbrach, P.D., and M.R. Wawrzynski. 2005. Faculty do matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education* 46, no. 2: 153\_84.

Zepke, N., and L. Leach. 2010a. Improving student engagement in post-compulsory education: A synthesis of research literature. Wellington: Teaching & Learning Research Initiative.

Zepke, N., and L. Leach. 2010b. Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for action. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 11: 167.

Zepke, N., L. Leach, and P. Butler. 2009. Student motivation and engagement in learning. *The student experience*, Proceedings of the 32nd HERDSA Annual Conference, 6\_9 July, in Darwin, Australia, 529\_38.