Engaging first year students: a collaborative approach implemented in a first year nursing course

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Abstract

Higher education is increasingly pre-occupied with issues relating to student engagement. While a growing body of literature links student engagement with university transition and retention, other strands reveal students’ growing disengagement with university culture. The issues are largely expressed through political and empirical debates but lack theoretical perspectives capable of providing understandings of the processes involved in student engagement. This paper re-conceptualises the processes of engagement and applies the understandings gained to a first year nursing course conducted at the University of Southern Queensland. The approach incorporates collaborations with other stakeholders in the first year experience. It also prioritises three critical practices or ‘skills of engagement’ that students can integrate to facilitate their engagement with mainstream university culture. The paper additionally documents the findings of a pilot study, as well as other evaluative data, investigating the effectiveness of the approach. The results are encouraging revealing benefits such as improved student engagement with university and discipline processes.

Introduction

Whereas the research literature on university engagement has proliferated since the 1990s, theoretical perspectives addressing the critical and complex nature of engagement have been slower to emerge. This paper attempts to redress this imbalance by integrating research and theoretical perspectives, applying them to the processes of engagement, and incorporating them into the learning/teaching pedagogy of a first year nursing course, Communication: Key Concepts (Nursing) (CMS1007). The paper also documents the findings of a pilot study and other assessment instruments evaluating the effectiveness of the approach.

The context

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a regional university whose student body is diverse (international, alternative entry, mature-age, first generation and equity students) and often unfamiliar with mainstream university and discipline-specific processes. Many students have also experienced failure at school and lack the academic, socio-cultural and linguistic understandings important for university engagement and success.

The course

CMS1007 is a first year on-campus course that operates in collaboration with two concurrent courses (Psychosocial Foundations of Nursing (NUR1020) and Introductory Nursing (NUR2010) in the first year of the Bachelor of Nursing Program at USQ. CMS1007 incorporates a student-centred, facilitative-interactive learning pedagogy. The course assessment includes three summative items: an article review/critique; a proposal/draft; and an essay investigating the critical impact of cultural and communicative diversity.

Research and evaluations
A pilot study, conducted in semester 2, 2005, investigated how effective CMS1007 was in assisting students to engage key university and nursing processes and in facilitating their development and application of three key engagement practices. Students (n = 138)\(^1\) were surveyed by email and asked to provide open-ended feedback. The qualitative data collected was analysed using a thick layered approach (Martin-McDonald, 2000). Other sources of evaluative data documented in the paper include the Student Evaluation of Teachers Survey (SETS) administered by the university\(^2\) (2003-5), student results (2003-5) and peer reviews\(^3\).

**Research perspectives relating to student engagement**

Student engagement in higher education (HE) is underpinned by two emerging, but separate, research strands. The significance of student engagement is corroborated by research linking engagement with transition and retention (McInnis, 2003; Tinto, 2005; Yorke, 2000; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003). Kuh (2005) argues that engagement is vital because "the more time and energy students devote to desired activities, the more likely they are to develop the habits of the mind that are key to success".

A separate research strand, however, reveals students’ growing disengagement with university life generally and with study in particular (Kuh, 2003; Marklein, 2005; McInnis, 2003). One reason stems from the increasing numbers of students engaged in part-time or full-time work (McInnis 2000). Another reason emanates from the HE sector’s increasing flexibility. Marklein (2005) documents the effects caused by increasing student transfers between institutions as an important factor in disengagement in the United States. McInnis (2003) cites market competition, new technologies and flexibility in course delivery, which has become an institutional performance measure in its own right, as major contributors to disengagement in Australia. McInnis (2003) declares that, as a result, students have many more choices about when, where and what they will study, and how much commitment they need to make to university life. This has led to a general disengagement with university which not only reflects changes to the priority students now give to their time at university, but also reflects the perception that students increasingly expect universities to fit their lives rather than vice-versa (McInnis, 2003:3).

Developing the term ‘negotiated engagement’ to characterise this phenomenon, McInnis (2003) outlines the ways in which it influences students’ attitudes and behaviours: to be generally clear about what they want from the university and what it can do for them but to remain unclear about their obligations to the university; to find it more difficult to motivate themselves to study and to spend less time on tasks that would improve their learning; to choose a pragmatic cycle of low expectations and low demands; to engage in part-time work as the sole or main source of independent income; to be less likely to study on weekends; and to increasingly use information and computer-based technologies but not necessarily in ways that enhance their engagement with the learning experience or the learning community.

The literature, generally, unlike McInnis’s negotiated engagement, does not specify explicit engagement practices. However, it does explore institutional, pedagogical and student responsibilities/roles in relation to engagement. The paper will review these responsibilities/roles, inform them with understandings gained from the theoretical perspectives provided by critical discourse, constructivist and cross-cultural theories, and outline the ways in which these perspectives are applied to foster engagement in CMS1007.

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\(^1\) 45 responses were received, but given that this feedback was sought after the end of semester and during the Christmas break, the response rate was encouraging.

\(^2\) The Student Evaluation of Teaching Survey (SETS) are instruments (on-campus, distance and fully online) administered independently by the university. There has been the requirement that all courses be assessed.

\(^3\) Staff comments were collected as part of a Carrick nomination for first year learning/teaching (2006)
Institutional responsibilities and course initiatives

The institutional role in engagement refers to the actions and responsibilities – policies, processes and support structures – designed by institutions to engage students. It includes institutionally-led, strategic and research-informed policies designed to enhance student engagement, including initiatives targeted at leading and transforming university culture. According to McInnis (2003) overturning the trends towards student disengagement in Australia not only involves re-asserting the value of student engagement, it also requires that universities recognise and address the competing pressures that influence student priorities and reaffirm their own roles and obligations as learning communities. McInnis (2003) cites Justice Michael Kirby of the High Court of Australia:

...universities must be strong enough to be very demanding of their students. To demand a real participation in the interactive exchange of knowledge and values that is the hallmark of the university experience...Isolation is intellectually and emotionally limiting (Kirby, 2002 cited in McInnis, 2003:12)

Student disengagement radiating from changing student contexts, as well as the calls for universities to reignite their leadership in relation to student engagement, constitute important challenges for institutions, ones that can be better understood and informed by the application of theoretical perspectives. Critical discourse theory (CDT), for example, informs institutional policies by visualising pedagogical practices and outcomes as discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1995) and by arguing that if primacy of discourse is acknowledged then mastery of discourse can be seen to constitute a principal educational process and outcome (Luke, 1999:67). With this insight, institutions can focus on the ways in which they can facilitate students’ engagement with mainstream university discourses.

This insight is integrated into the rationale for CMS1007. The course characterises the university as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of subcultures, each with its own discourse or literacy. CMS’s rationale accommodates the understanding that pivotal to the institutional-student relationship (especially in first year) is students’ engagement with these literacies. CMS initiatives to assist students to develop these literacies – including their learning and critical capabilities, academic and tertiary discourses, oral presentation skills, research methodologies and communication, information, cultural and administrative literacies – are included as learning objectives. Course content also focuses on these capabilities and practices. CMS1007 modules cover communication theory, oral presentations, academic literacy, and interpersonal and teamwork literacies.

The insight provided by CDT also underpins CMS’s summative assessment. The first assignment is an article review critique in which students:

- Select a research article from academic data bases that will form part of the research base for either their NUR1020 or NUR2010 assignments. Students first participate in information literacy classes conducted by library staff;
- Summarise the article (using learning, reading and note-taking skills that have been prioritised and made explicit in the workshops);
- Evaluate its structure (after being introduced to positivist, interpretive and critical approaches and qualitative/quantitative research methodologies – nursing students need to be able to demonstrate both);
- Critically evaluate the article (its authority, accuracy, currency, relevance, objectivity and stability); and
- Reflect on their understanding of both their own learning practices and the literacies by explicitly addressing these in relevant workshops.

Kaye Cumming, Liaison Librarian, Science Faculty, confirms the efficacy of the approach:

The level of interest and success demonstrated by students in the tutorials, and the feedback I have received from the course examiner, indicate that this embedded information literacy approach works well and enhances student learning.

Research respondents reflected on how CMS had helped their engagement at university:

CMS1007 helped me become a lot more familiar with using the library and databases.
I can notice an amazing difference in my assignment writing…I just feel like I’m achieving better skills. 

CMS1007 helped to reinforce my familiarity with the languages of the uni, and I certainly felt more confident in using all avenues of the uni as a result of this. The information session in the library with Kay was very useful for me as I had not previously understood the database system. 

The assessments were significant in introducing us to facilities such as the library and databases, and also to become adept in all aspects of academic writing, such as referencing.

A complicating factor for institutions in addressing student engagement is the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of the student body (Krause, 2005; McInnis, 2003). Some students may not only be unfamiliar, they may also have belief systems or cultural practices which are inconsistent with, or opposed to, mainstream university practices (Lawrence, 2005). For example, referencing and research literacies are culturally-based and understood differently in different cultures (thus leading to accusations of plagiarism and collusion). This diversity not only challenges institutional policy and practice, it also makes more transparent the crucial nature of the interrelationships between students’ various kinds of capital (see Bourdieu, 1999) and consequences for engagement (Burton & Dowling, 2005; Kantanis, 2002). These challenges are being addressed by research. Braxton and Hirschy (2005) prioritise institutional values and actions and the ways in which these can not only create a learning climate that affects learning but also value and adapt to the challenges posed by student diversity. Others argue that engagement can be improved when institutions adapt their cultures to meet their students’ needs (Burton & Dowling, 2005; Kift & Nelson, 2005).

CMS1007 addresses this diversity by understanding that each student, as they enter university, brings with them their own socio-cultural, linguistic and academic capitals and that the course has a role in assisting students to identify and understand these as well as incorporating strategies that increase students’ awareness of their own cultural beliefs/practices. All CMS1007 workshops have the goal of assisting students to unpack the socio-cultural, academic and linguistic capitals with which they enter university. In the first workshop, for instance, an ice breaker exercise—naming as a cultural practice—is used where students identify social, cultural and political assumptions underpinning the naming process. A research respondent reflected:

CMS has made me analyse and rethink my pre-perceptions of people differently now. Although I thought I was sensitive to the cultural differences of others, the course has made me much more aware of the differences between cultures & how culture can dominate the health aspects/outcome of a patient.

Students’ own understandings about university/discipline literacies/cultural practices are canvassed and understood before the university and discipline literacies are made explicit and the rationale for their presence in the HE context unpacked. Learning style surveys and self-test exercises are incorporated to assist students with these processes, helping them understand their learning and cognitive practices better and to fine tune these to the range of HE and workplace contexts more effectively. For example:

The course helped me to gain a better understanding of my own and the different cultures that are in the university. It also made me realise that as a nurse I will have to cater to different cultures needs as every culture has its own unique way of doing things.

**Pedagogical responsibilities and course initiatives**

In early literature, responsibilities for fostering student engagement were based on the concept of student interest. John Dewey (1913), for example, equated student engagement with student interest, and advised that in order to educate children successfully, teachers should seek to discover where their interests lie, and then teach to those interests (cited in Rickford, 2005). More contemporary educators, particularly those drawing on constructivist perspectives that learners are influenced by socio-cultural factors embedded in their environment, believe that
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one vehicle for student interest and engagement is a curriculum that incorporates real-world connections and applications (Rickford, 2005). Rickford adds that real-life work is meaningful to students and connecting academic content to their lives sustains student interest and involvement in difficult tasks. This strand promotes culturally relevant literature for teaching ethnically diverse students – literature containing themes, ideas, and issues that are consistent with their lived experiences, and with which they can readily identify. From a constructivist viewpoint, Azzarito and Ennis (2003) argue that student engagement encompasses social setting, and occurs through peer interactions, student ownership of the curriculum and educational experiences that are authentic for students, all components that can be fostered in the learning/teaching pedagogy. Multiliteracies pedagogy (MLP) builds on the constructivist perspectives by highlighting the role of students’ socio-cultural capital. MLP coined the term ‘situated practice’ to reflect the importance of first understanding and addressing students’ own experiences (which are increasingly defined by cultural and sub-cultural diversity) before their learning practices can be informed, engaged and ‘transformed’ (Cope & Kalzantis, 2000).

These theoretical assumptions underpin CMS assignment 2 (weighting 20%), the plan/draft for an essay which students write for the parallel nursing course NUR1020 (weighting 75%). The NUR1020 essay asks students to consider five key experiences that have shaped their sense of self, discuss them with a partner, embed them in an appropriate research base and relate their reflections about these to their future professional practice. Student feedback confirmed the efficacy of this assessment item:

CMS1007 really helped me to learn how to break down an essay question and how to easily write the essay in the correct style. While I was researching and writing my essays I referred to the notes from CMS1007 as much as the notes from the courses themselves. The words/phrases to use during referencing and the words to avoid in an academic essay were also invaluable!

I now feel confident in writing an essay that would have overwhelmed me in the past.

I felt I learnt, and am still learning, how to use certain language in assignments, which I found difficult.

The course was like being given a formula to unlock academic language and writing. Your notes, assignments and advice will never be put in the recycling box.

The course helped me plan my assignment writing and understand academic writing more effectively. It also help me start my assignment earlier than what I would of. This course was useful to me as I did not know much about assignment writing and literature.

Jill Scanlan (Course leader, NUR1020) affirms the effectiveness of this liaison:

The purpose of the liaison is to provide content and processes that match the communication and scholarly writing needs of students to the context of NUR1020. Jill uses workshops that directly address assessment tasks set in NUR1020. She provides examples worked to illustrate core concepts and helps students identify each stage of the assessment process by ‘unpacking’ the tasks. Her reinforcement of the goals of NUR1020 assessment goes beyond providing students with tools to successfully meet the cognitive objectives, but also supports the deeper affective learning embedded in the activity. Assessment in CMS1007 directly connects students to scholarly writing requirements.

In the literature, alternative pedagogical initiatives designed to generate engagement focus on teaching strategies facilitating interaction or dialogue. De Jesus, Pedrosa; de Souza, Francislê, Teixeira-Dias and Watts (2005) argue that questioning techniques contribute to students’ engagement in the discipline, bringing an increase of interaction between teacher and students, an increase in the confidence and trust of the students in the asking of questions, and therefore an increase in the quality of classroom interactions and in learning and teaching. Spiller (2005) believes both that teaching requires ongoing dialogue between teacher and student as together they explore their subject matter and that class participation and interaction of students can enhance the quality and quantity of their engagement. Spiller (2005) argues that engagement is facilitated by step-by-step learning, encouragement to relate
to their subject matter in a purposeful way, exercises aimed at giving students greater readiness and confidence to contribute to seminar discussions and to learn from each other. CMS1007 applies these understandings by engineering situations and opportunities where students are required to engage with their studies, their fellow students and university staff. This is generated through interaction, problem solving activities, reflective discussion points, group work and role plays; by posting issues for understanding, discussion and reflection; through the inclusion of on-line interactive learning experiences, including self-test exercises and structured discussion groups; by being accessible for consultation – through structured discussion groups, set consultation times, and flexibility in contact opportunities; by providing opportunities for feedback – for example awarding marks for article selection choice in assignment 1 and for a draft/plans for assignment 3; by incorporating referrals and encouraging students to seek out sources of help and information; and by encouraging re-submissions for failing assignments, as well as referrals as above. Respondents commented:

The feedback from Jill helped a lot and helped me realise if I was on the correct track or not.

It was really helpful in learning how to speak uni language…this helped a great deal as I could gather my information appropriately and get it checked, therefore I knew I was heading along the right path. This is much better than my usual process of stumbling along with the subject hoping I had the right idea.

If I wasn’t confident in using these facilities, I knew there was always somebody who could help me out.

Wendy Lee Kyle, First Year Convenor in Nursing, supports the effectiveness of these approaches:

From my experience of working with Jill and from unsolicited student feed back to me, CMS1007 has a very positive and effective impact on the quality of student learning within the Bachelor of Nursing. Jill’s open, flexible and consultative approach to teaching and assessment fosters and promotes independent learning and defiantly empowers, motives and inspires the students to learn. The open channels of communication Jill creates in her teaching practice allows for feedback and clarification for the students and gives them the confidence and knowledge to apply the concepts she teaches to their other courses.

**Student responsibilities and course initiatives**

A parallel focus in the literature on student engagement centres on the strategies and behaviours that students need to possess/exhibit to engage with their studies. According to Hu and Kuh (2002: 555 cited in Strahm & Danaher, 2005:45) engagement is “the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes”. Hu and Kuh (2002) argue that engagement includes behaviours like to coming to class prepared, interacting with faculty outside of class, and using the support services available on campus. Spiller (2005) suggests that engagement is premised on the central role of the student in the educational process. It is what students do that determines whether changes in their understanding actually take place (Spiller 2005). Biggs (1999) begins with the premise that students need to discover their subject matter for themselves and experience it as their own. Others recognise that effort and peer support represent facets of engagement (Benn, 2003; Kuh, 2003; Yorke, 1999). Kuh (2003), for instance, asserts that the most important determinants of student success at university are the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and university life and that studying with other students adds considerable value to learning outcomes.

Cross-cultural communication theory (Bandura 1986; Bandura & Locke 2003) adds a further dimension to the research by highlighting the role played by students’ self efficacy. Krause (2005) discusses the importance of the affective aspect of a student’s personality and the need to promote the self esteem of students by allowing them to be continually acknowledged, seen and heard. Self-efficacious individuals operate as “anticipative, purposive and self-evaluating regulators of their motivation and actions” (Krause 2005 citing Bandura & Locke, 2003:87). Krause (2005) contends that those who persist (and therefore engage) are more likely to be self-regulatory in their learning and coping styles. This style encompasses students’
commitment to study, their sense of purpose and independent learning and their capacity to
engage with peers in the learning community, manage their time and commitments and also
engender a sense of their own belonging and involvement (Krause 2005).

While such literature highlights the role of students’ self efficacy, it does not advance specific
and concrete capabilities that students can use to actively engage with their studies. Lawrence
(2005), however, has developed three practical ‘skills of engagement’ or practices that may
constitute students’ means of facilitating their engagement:

- **Reflective practice**, which emerges from educational (Schön, 1987) and sociological
  (Giddens, 1996) literature. Reflective practice gives emphasis to students’ capacities to
  observe, to watch and to listen to the socio-cultural practices occurring in the context.
  Reflective practice also encompasses the concepts of ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection
  on action’ (Schön, 1987) as well as ‘reflection before action’ (Boud & Walker, 1990).

- **Socio-cultural practice** (see Lawrence 2005), which stems from cross-cultural
  communication theory (CCT) (Bandura, 1986; Hofstede, 1997). CCT contends that, in
  order to reap maximum benefits from an unfamiliar context, newcomers need to establish
  interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with mainstream hosts. Integral to
  these learning processes is an individual’s self-efficacy, the belief that he or she can
  successfully perform social behaviours in academic and everyday situations (Bandura,
  1986). Bandura’s (1986) social learning model is used as the basis of a cross-cultural
  communication program, ExcelL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and
  Leadership Program (Mak, Westwood, Barker & Ishiyama, 1998). ExcelL enables people
  who have recently arrived in a new culture to be competent and effective in dealing with
  members of the host culture. ExcelL not only emphasises the role of socio-cultural
  competencies in helping students adjust to an unfamiliar university culture, it also
  prioritises specific socio-cultural capabilities: seeking help and information, participating
  in a group, making social contact, seeking and offering feedback, expressing
  disagreement and refusing requests.

- **Critical practice**, which encompasses twin capacities: students’ capabilities for self-
  awareness of their own belief systems and cultural practices (critical self awareness – to
  look within), and their awareness of power configurations impacting on them and the
  context in which they find themselves (critical discourse awareness – to look without).
  Kelly (2003:3) suggests that critical self-awareness requires a “continued attention to the
  place from which we speak” whereas Gee (1999) describes it as the need to make visible
  to ourselves who we are and what we are doing. It incorporates people’s capacities for
  unpacking their own cultural perspectives and belief systems (their socio-cultural capital),
  as well as their readiness to challenge these and to transform them if the need arises.
  Critical discourse awareness differs from critical self-awareness in that it concentrates on
  the power configurations operating in the context and underscores the role of
  social/cultural critique of the discourses operating in the setting (Fairclough, 1995). This
  awareness includes students’ capabilities for language critique including “their capacities
  for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself” (Fairclough, 1995:1).

The development of these ‘skills of engagement’ or practices comprises a key goal in
CMS1007. In relation to reflective practice students were asked to reflect on the development
of their learning/academic capacities at the beginning of each workshop. Formative
assessment/drafts were integrated with the objective that students reflect on their practices
and to seek to improve their capabilities in relation to these practices. In the parallel course,
NUR1020, students were required to complete a portfolio entry each workshop (weighting
25%) reflecting on their experiences/practices in the workshop. Respondents reflected:

CMS1007 made me seek ideas from outside sources, such as the cultural awareness educator I interviewed,
which greatly impacted different ideas on me.
I did not enjoy high school and because of my lack of interest, failed to understand how to structure work. I actually finished school with an O.P. of 24 but am now sitting on a GPA of 5.73.

CMS1007 learning objectives prioritise and develop students’ use of socio-cultural practice in many ways. Apart from the capabilities being prioritised, made explicit and demonstrated in each workshop, their use is also explicitly engineered through sample assignments, formative assessment, including drafts and proposals, and marking criteria feedback sheets which are clearly explained, linked to objectives and provided ahead. Feedback is encouraging:

I found your method of teaching excellent, it involved students and I could give my opinion freely. (SETS)

CMS was of immense value to me as I was returning to study after ten years, while also parenting two young children. Thank you so much for your willingness to give feedback on assignments, to keep asking us if we understood the process, and to mark so amazingly fast despite all that was going on for you at the time

I found that by reviewing the journals and discussing them, I grasped cultural awareness in a very different light, which I will incorporate in my nursing practice.

There are also factors, however, which may inhibit students’ self-efficacy and use of socio-cultural practice. In an academic setting, power imbalances between institutional practices/staff and students can affect student engagement (Cox, 2003). CMS1007 acknowledges this understanding by first making explicit, and critically reflecting on, the ways in which power configurations operate, both in the hierarchical, individualist and competitive HE setting and in the future professional health care contexts. Students ‘skills of engagement’ thus include the capacity to be aware of and understand (if not attempt to transform) such discursive practices by providing (sometimes negative) feedback and expressing disagreement. Students’ use of critical practice is developed in the workshops, which include weekly reflections about course, program and university practices and by coaching and practice of the more difficult, ‘risky’ practices (using the ‘sandwich’ or ‘kiss-kick-kiss’ approach) in the workshops. It is also developed in CMS assignment 3: the 2005 topic required students to develop an analytical essay in relation to the quote:

Cultural competence in nursing must be based on a reflection on self (including one’s own culture and profession, power imbalances, attitudes and beliefs about the ‘other’) and enhanced communication skills (Dowd, Eckermann & Jeffs, 2005:140).

Students reflected:

I feel that the assignment on “the importance of cultural awareness and communication skills for nurses’ was particularly important in assisting me in gaining greater care and compassion.

CMS1007 certainly made me think a great deal more about language and the ways in which we perceive and judge communication.

I learnt a lot about cultural diversity and the ways that mainstream culture can disadvantage people in the health care system.

It has made me analyse and rethink my pre-perceptions of people differently now. Although I thought I was sensitive to the cultural differences of others, the course has made me much more aware of the differences between cultures and how culture can dominate the health aspects/outcome of a patient.

Additional evaluative data

Student feedback collected in the pilot study verifies the integration of research, theoretical and student perspectives in relation to student engagement and supports their implementation in CMS1007. The feedback suggests that engagement can be fostered by institutional and pedagogical initiatives and students’ use and integration of strategies and practices that will assist them to become more engaged members of the learning community.

That, however, there are also inter-relationships between institutional and pedagogical factors and student practices, and that these also have consequences for engagement, are also documented in the literature. Strahm and Danaher (2005, p.45), for example, argue that
students’ engagement depends not only on the quantity and quality of interaction with their 
learning partners but also on “students’ perceptions of their teachers, of their peers, and of 
themselves as learners”. Tinto (2005) discusses the interactions between students and other 
individuals in the university community and how students’ interpretations of these contacts 
affect their engagement. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) maintain that engagement is 
influenced by students’ perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued and 
accommodated and how differences between their cultures of origin and immersion are 
bridged. McInnis (2003:9) suggests that engagement occurs:

… where students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning, where 
learning outside the classroom is considered as important as the timetabled and structured experience, and 
where students actively connect to the subject matter.

CMS1007 SETS and results confirm that these interrelationships, as well as students’ 
perceptions of them, are positively developed in the approaches implemented in the course 
and that the course contributes to their university engagement. For example, there are very 
high SETS ratings, despite the generally held perception that first year courses score lower 
ratings. The SETS (2003-5) for Question 11: how would you rate the teaching of the lecturer 
in this course are documented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>My Rating / 7 point scale</th>
<th>USQ Mean</th>
<th>No of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Course results are also very positive, suggesting that CMS1007 contributes to student 
learning and engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Cut off marks</th>
<th>2003 (210 students)</th>
<th>2004 (196 students)</th>
<th>2005 (138 students)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HD</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNP</td>
<td>Non participation failure</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results indicate that students had mastered and were able to demonstrate the literacies and 
the engagement practices prioritised in CMS. That students were also able to replicate these 
results in parallel courses is supported by Jill Scanlan, leader NUR1020:

Students in NUR1020 who are working in CMS1007 show consistently high levels of compliance in both 
writing structure and referencing style. The result for these students has been improved assessment scores.

**Conclusion**

The paper has integrated research and theoretical perspectives, applied them to engagement 
and described how they were incorporated into the learning/teaching pedagogy of the first 
year nursing course. The paper also evaluated the approach. The data suggests that the course 
assists students to engage the literacies they encounter in their first year and incorporate skills 
of engagement into their university practices. Longitudinal research is needed, however, to 
investigate the effectiveness of the engagement practices in the students’ second and third 
years of study and in their future professional practice.
References


