Student engagement, practice architectures and phronesis in the student transitions and experiences project

TAYLOR, Carol <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0914-8461>

Student Engagement, Practice Architectures and *Phronesis* in The Student Transitions and Experiences Project

This article discusses the Student Transitions and Experiences (STEP) project, in which visual and creative research methodologies were used to enhance student engagement. The article provides an overview of three main strands within the field of student engagement practice, and explores the STEP project as an instance of the 'critical-transformative' strand. The article draws on recent theorizations by Kemmis *et al*. (2011) of practice architectures and ecologies of practice to propose an understanding of the STEP project as a practice 'niche'. In thinking through some implications of student engagement as a practice architecture, the article sheds analytical light on student engagement as a specific and complex form of contemporary education practice. The later part of the article focuses on a consideration of *phronesis* and praxis in specific instances from the STEP project. Working with concepts from Barad (2007), the article develops a conceptualization of the STEP project as an intra-active, entangled situated and particularistic practice of *phronesis-praxis*.

Keywords: student engagement, practice architectures, *phronesis*, praxis, entanglement, participatory research

Introduction

The impetus for this paper is traceable to my desire (and need) as an educational researcher, practitioner and theorist, to reflect on a recent student engagement project in a post-1992 university. The Student Transitions and Experiences Project (STEP) was a six-stage project which used visual and creative methods within an evolving participatory research design to explore students' transition to university, to find out about students' experiences during their first year as undergraduates and to promote student engagement. The students were studying on a BA (Hons) Education Studies degree. The article has three aims. The first aim is to share insights about student engagement research practice. The second aim is to explore the theoretical utility of Kemmis *et al*.'s (2008; 2011) concept of practice architectures in relation to the STEP project in order to identify some of the complex and specific features of student engagement as an important contemporary educational research practice. The third aim of the paper condenses around reflexive questions of whether, how and in what ways the project was an instance of *phronesis*, that is a form of social inquiry based on principles of good sense, prudence, wisdom and good judgment (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This third aim of the article takes up recent debates about *phronesis* and praxis. I consider the distinction between *phronesis* as a form of 'public philosophy' in which the educational researcher thinks and acts as 'a kind of 'conscience' for social life' (Kemmis, 2010, p.15 - 16), and praxis as educational action. I propose Barad's (2007) notions of intra-action and entanglement as a way of thinking beyond a *phronesis*-praxis dualism; and I argue that these theorisations enable us to see how student engagement as a practice, and the STEP project as an instance of *phronesis-praxis*, may 'speak back to' and critique prevailing dominant discourses of student engagement.

The article begins with an overview of the Student Transitions and Experiences Project. It then traces the different strands of student engagement (SE) practice and

situates the STEP project within the 'critical-transformative' strand of student engagement. After a consideration of how SE as a practice architecture is inflected within the project, the article discussed *phronesis* and praxis, before moving onto thinking about the STEP project as a form of *phronesis-praxis*. The article concludes with a consideration of some of the advantages, tensions and omissions these conceptualizations give rise to in the light of empirical evidence from the STEP project.

The Student Transitions and Experiences Project: Research Design

The STEP project was a six-stage project funded over two academic years through the university's Learning, Teaching and Assessment fund. The original aims of the project were:

- To research the first year student experience in order to aid transition into university life and learning;
- To raise levels of student engagement through visual research;
- To support independent thinking, learner autonomy and student skills development.

These aims were explicitly framed by a participatory research methodology to support staff and students in working and researching together on the project. All 26 students from the first year BA (Hons) Education Studies degree received an invitation to participate in the project to which nine students responded. Project participants included myself and one other member of staff in the first year of the project and myself in the second year, nine students began the project, six students completed five stages of the project and five students remained in the project until its completion with stage six. The six project stages are briefly outlined below. The two staff members took the lead in designing in detail the first stage of the project and designing in outline the second and third stages; however, in practice, after stage one, each subsequent stage of the project evolved through an ongoing, developing and increasingly dialogic and creative collaboration between staff and student participants.

The first year of the project included three stages as follows:
Stage 1: Reflective semi-structured interviews with nine first year students. The purpose of the interviews was to 'capture' students' experiences of transition to university. Students were invited to reflect on processes of learning, teaching and assessment, their fears and expectations about coming to university, the opportunities they had taken up since starting their course, support networks such as family, peers, friends, and their aspirations while on the course.
Stage 2: Using visual media to represent 'transition'. Students were invited to use photography and digital video to express visually their views, experiences and feelings about transition to university and about any significant events in their first year. The brief for this stage of the project was entirely open in order to aim for the fullest possible scope for student voice and individual originality. By opening up a 'free' visual and aural space the aim was to encourage students to focus on what was meaningful to them, to express themselves creatively, and to think about how some of the affective and social dimensions of their transitions experiences could be visually represented and communicated. Technical support in the use of digital video, use of software for storyboards and Moviemaker for video editing was provided. Students

produced individual and pair videos and one student produced an extensive photo-storyboard.

Stage 3: Students-as-researchers. Two staff and three students collaborated on a students-as-researchers (SAR) project with sixth form students from a relatively deprived area of the city. The sixth form students were at the end of their AS year which is the first year of A Level study in the UK. The aim of the SAR project was twofold: to investigate sixth form students' understandings, hopes and fears about going to HE and to raise their awareness about the student experience in higher education. The undergraduates were involved in the SAR research design, including the design and development of research instruments for a focus group and small group interviews, writing an ethics statement, data collection, and subsequent thematic data analysis. Staff and student project participants did a collaborative presentation at a national conference which marked the formal end of this stage (Taylor *et al.*, 2009).

The second year of the project included three more stages:

Stage 4: Reflexive interviews with six second year students. These individual interviews used a method I had previously developed called video-prompted reflexivity (Taylor, 2011). This involved students in re-viewing their videos and, in one case storyboard and selecting key points from it as the basis for discussions within the interview. The discussions were wide-ranging and included transitions, first and second year experiences and critical incidents, skills acquisition, the ongoing development of an academic identity, the relationship between biography and learning, and future career aspirations. Taking place in April of the second year of their degree, these reflexive video-prompted interviews pivoted between looking back and looking forward and provided students with scope to give voice to longer-term, culturally-embedded narratives about their higher education experiences. They also gave impetus to, and a foundation for, stage five of the project.

Stage 5: Experience-centred narratives using visual media and personal stories. Conversations in various formal and informal contexts with students indicated a strong collective desire to 'follow-up' the first videos and storyboard, in order to represent their trajectories of 'moving on' which had occurred since the previous year. Again, the brief was entirely open to allow maximum scope for individual students' creative voices and students produced second videos and one produced a second storyboard. At the same time, a current third year student working as a student intern was brought into the project to collaborate with the second years on the production of written personal stories about their educational experiences for publication on the project website.

Stage 6: Creative Writing and Academic Writing.

This stage of the project began with a three-day writing workshop the aim of which was to firm up ideas about project dissemination and publishable texts we could collaboratively generate (in addition to the web-based personal stories already written in stage five). The first day of the workshop was led by a poet who encouraged participants – four students and myself – to 'free up' thinking about the boundaries between creative and academic writing, gave practical tips and techniques about how to write creatively in various prose and poetic formats, and led a group writing activity on the theme of transition. By the end of the first day, a number of writing 'outputs' – including conference presentations and a co-authored academic paper on themes from the project – had been identified. In the remaining two days of the workshop, the students wrote stories, narrative accounts and poems on their transition experiences and their involvement in the STEP project, while I wrote a poem, searched for a suitable conference, and drafted the introduction to the proposed

collaborative journal article. Both days ended with a plenary where all texts and drafts were shared, discussed and amended by group agreement. The project ended with a commitment to seeing the conference presentation and article through to completion.

Student Engagement as a Field of Practice

Student engagement (SE) is an emergent field of practice and theory in UK higher education. As a contemporary buzzword, sought-after institutional outcome, and valorised normative practice, 'student engagement' has come to mean many different things to different people in different international, national and local institutional contexts. From the perspective of the USA, Alexson and Flick (2011, p.41) note that 'definitions of student engagement are often tangled semantically as well as conceptually', while in a comparative study of student engagement in Canadian and Australian contexts, McMahon and Zyngier (2009, p.165) point out that 'the term is used in multiple and often contradictory ways' depending on the ideologies invoked and the required purposes sought. These views resonate in the UK where SE is discursively deployed as a term with many meanings. Within this discursive multiplicity, however, it is possible to unpick three strands or paradigms of practice.

The first strand, as Bryson and Hand's (2007) recent review shows, articulates 'student engagement' as a means to improve teaching and learning. In the teaching and learning literature SE is viewed variously as a means to promote active learning, peer learning, deep as opposed to surface learning, and students' autonomy in learning; as a way of measuring 'good teaching' and conceptualizing students' orientations to learning; and as a means to think about students' personal agency and/or the socio-cultural aspects of learning. This teaching and learning SE strand contrasts with, and complements, a second SE strand, one more explicitly oriented to national policy and institutional articulations, and in which it is the more instrumental and measurement capacities of student engagement which loom large.

Originally developed as a means for HE institutions and staff to conceptualize and measure students' experiences in a holistic way (Bryson *et al*., 2010), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), established in 1998 and first administered in 2000, is the oldest of the international student engagement measurement systems. Used in US and Canadian higher education institutions (HEIs), its twin aims are to assess how much 'time and effort' students put into their studies in order to facilitate the institution's ability to maximize their resources and curricula to ensure that student participation is linked to learning (About NSSE, 2012). The UK National Student Survey (NSS) began later in 2005 and was quickly absorbed into national government policy frameworks for enhancing quality assurance of HEIs. In the UK, the purposes of the NSS are articulated as being to 'gather feedback on the quality of students' courses in order to contribute to public accountability as well as to help inform the choices of future applicants to HE' (National Student Survey, 2012), in addition to facilitating best practice and enhancing the student learning experience (How are the survey results used? 2012). The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) was first run in 2007 in Australian and New Zealand HE institutions. Designed with input from NSSE specialists, the AUSSE aims to 'help stimulate evidence-focused conversations about students' engagement in university study' so that institutions can better 'monitor and enhance the quality of education they provide' (Background, 2012).

However, as this brief overview shows, even within the stated aims and purposes of national student engagement surveys the chameleon nature of the term 'student engagement' is evident. Albeit that all three national surveys mentioned here are constructed to provide 'evidence' from large-scale quantitative data sets, their discursive articulation includes implicitly and explicitly: the provision of institutionally comparative national data to promote student choice in a student-as-consumer framework; internationally comparative 'league tables' and benchmarking data in the context of global institutional educational performativity; accountability of institutions to students; and accountability of HEIs for their share of GDP. In the UK it is likely that the NSS results in future years will underpin, indeed play a part in producing, an increasingly fragmented higher education field marked by a hierarchical, competitive and divisive new elitism (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011).

The third strand of the student engagement field of practice is hinted at by the word 'conversation' in the AUSSE. This strand situates SE within a longer educational tradition of participatory, dialogic practice. It is this tradition of SE which informs the STEP project, although SE in its improving teaching and learning and 'measurement' and accountability manifestations, as outlined above, provide an inevitable institutional backdrop to the project.

Ongoing work on student voice and students-as-researchers practices in schools and colleges (Cruddas, 2007; Fielding, 2004) has many resonances with this third strand of SE within universities, particularly in terms of values, practices and ethics. At its heart is an understanding of student engagement as a relational, contextual, embodied and ethical participatory praxis. This strand of SE seeks to contest what Bryson *et al.* (2010, p.11) call the 'industrial relations' model of SE which focuses on the representation of the collective views of students in relation to strategic improvements in university governance and quality assurance. As Bragg (2003) points out, such a discursive articulation of student engagement sees it as a technology of power and governmentality where the aim is to co-opt student voice to instrumental institutional ends. In opposition to these institutional, and sometimes paternalistic and tokenistic forms of listening to and consulting with students, this third strand focuses on forms of student participation which are arguably deeper, genuine and more authentic (although I attach a somewhat cautionary note to these words here). According to Zyngier (2008) this paradigm of SE can be thought of as 'critical-transformative engagement' and its emphasis on the social and cultural aspects of education, on the lived experiences of students, and on the complexity of students' identities, accord it a democratic potential to reconstitute pedagogic relations, established hierarchies, and institutional structures (in much the same way that Fielding (2004) discusses the transformative possibilities of student voice in schools).

In higher education contexts, although this third strand of 'critical-transformative' SE is increasingly prevalent, it is still considerably less developed as practice and is still somewhat theoretically under-elaborated (although see Bryson *et al.* (2010); Zepke and Leach (2010); Zyngier (2008) and discussion below). Some significant current examples of higher education SE practice within this 'critical-transformative' strand include Exeter University's 'Students as Change Agents' programme which uses data generated by student researchers about a range of teaching and learning experiences to effect micro- and macro-level institutional changes (Students as Change Agents, 2012), and The University of Lincoln's 'Student as Producer' approach which embeds

student-engaged research as an 'organizing principle' for all teaching and learning across the University' (Research Engaged Teaching, 2012). In my university, there are ongoing initiatives to promote and embed innovative SE practice through a range of small-scale student voice projects (including the STEP project on which this paper is based), through the employment of student interns to support the development of student-focused teaching and learning initiatives, and through a students-as-researchers departmental initiative. These individual HEI initiatives have been supplemented at national level by various initiatives including: a Higher Education Academy Students as Stakeholders conference (ESCalate, 2010); the establishment of the annual British Conference of Undergraduate Research; and the National Student Learning and Teaching Network (NSLN, 2012), all of which promote active student engagement and participation in relation to core HEI activities.

Such SE practice initiatives have developed in tandem with an increasing number of theoretical, reflexive, and nuanced analyses of SE. For example, Lambert's (2009) radical reconfiguration of 'student engagement' as a dialogic practice possessing the contestatory political potential to undermine the hegemony of the higher education student-as-consumer model is supplemented by Lambert, Parker and Neary's (2007, p.534) view that SE can generate a 'critical approach to entrepreneurial practice' within universities and thus serve as a means to 'rethink the ways in which we teach, learn and research'. Zepke and Leach's (2010) argue for a rethinking of the relations between SE, 'soft outcomes' and student success which takes into account the diversity of student learning journeys, while Carey (2012) highlights the cultural, social, individual and structural factors which impinge on student representation in university governance and which produce SE as a complex and contested set of institutional interactions, and Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson (2010) point out the institutional benefits which accrue when students are actively involved in influencing institutional change. Drawing on the participatory tradition of student voice in schools and colleges, Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue for SE as an ethical practice underpinned by values and commitments which include: dialogic communication, conversation and consultation; participatory processes which draw their strength from including diversity and difference; an orientation to tackle inequalities in power relations; and a commitment to positive educational change. Other salient studies highlight the importance of the 'sedimented histories' of students and staff (Cruddas, 2007), the limitations of 'voice' as a metaphor for student engagement (Fielding, 2007) and what might be gained in using a postmodern theoretical framework to raise questions about power and participation (Taylor and Robinson, 2009).

This brief overview indicates some of the diversity of this third SE strand of practice. More significantly, it provides an account of SE as a political and ethical educational practice, where practice is understood as an 'organized nexus of actions' which 'hang together' in more or less coherent patterns (Schatzki, quoted in Kemmis et al., 2008, p.6 – 7). In order to think through SE as an educational practice I draw on Kemmis *et al.*'s (2008; 2011) recent theorisations of practice architectures. The concepts Kemmis *et al.* propose – in particular practice architectures, ecologies of practice and practice 'niche' – are, I think, useful conceptual tools for understanding student engagement as a specific and complex form of contemporary education practice. By using specific instances of SE practice from the STEP project, I want to illustrate how these concepts afford insights into how SE practices link together, work and are enacted through, and grounded within, everyday acts and decisions.

Practice Architectures, Student Engagement and the STEP Project

Kemmis *et al.*'s (2011) model of 'practice architectures and ecologies of practice' presents a sophisticated understanding of practice which brings a number of different dimensions into analytic relation. The first and most 'grounded' or 'horizontal' dimension is the 'saying, doings and relatings' of daily educational practice. These minutiae of everyday practice are constituted by and nested within broader 'vertical' frameworks of culture and discourse, material-economic exigencies, and socio-political structures. Both the horizontal and vertical dimensions prefigure and mediate practice by producing – and constraining – actions within the complex push-pull of daily educational practice. What this means is that what individuals do as social actors – that is, how they realize social action as educational practice – is mutually constituted, on the one hand, by the individuals themselves acting within the possibilities of available practice and, on the other, by the specific practices made possible by the ensemble of practices within a particular practice architecture. And, just as practice architectures determine the scope of educational action, they also provide the grounds for informing the meanings actors give to what they do which explains the assertion that practice architectures are about 'sayings, doings and relatings'. Kemmis *et al.*, (2008) also explain that the 'contents' of these 'horizontal' and 'vertical' dimensions of practice don't stand still: practices change due to the 'ecology' or networks of practices which sustain (or fail to sustain) them. It is this potential for change within an 'ecology of practice' which enable Kemmis *et al.* (2008) to posit practices as 'living things'. There is not the space here to unpack all the elements of this rich model of practice, so I focus strategically on those aspects which seem most illuminating as far as practice within the STEP project is concerned, beginning with the general and moving to the particular.

At a general level, the STEP project was prefigured and produced in and by the practice architecture of student engagement as it currently works through SE policies, practices, discourses and materialities which operate locally, institutionally, nationally and internationally. Above I alluded to the three strands of SE practice and located the STEP project within the 'critical-transformative-dialogic-participatory' SE strand, while noting that the other practice manifestations of SE (its improving teaching and learning and 'measurement' and accountability manifestations) hem and hedge it about. This SE practice 'location' of the STEP project fits with Kemmis *et al.*'s (2008, p.8) point that 'practices have "frontiers" [and] they come into existence in particular places (sites) at particular times'. This is certainly the case with student engagement as a practice architecture which, in the past few years, has morphed from a relatively benign set of strategies for combating *dis*-engagement to a fully-fledged, if heterogeneous, set of discourses and provisions, at various scales and with substantial reach and disciplinary power, to influence, construct and re-form educational relations within the current higher education field.

Kemmis *et al.* (2008) rightly urge some caution in using the concept of 'ecology of practice'. However, to the extent that SE is effectuated by a raft of sustaining relationships between a variety of different SE practices and interdependent SE practice domains, it could be seen to constitute a specific 'ecology of practice'. This is evident in how established practices help to initiate, form, influence and link with other practices at various different scales. For example, across national borders (the AUSSE was developed with help from the NSSE), or across sectors (the shared

participatory impulse of students-as-researchers practice in HEI's and schools and colleges), or within one specific 'strand' of SE (the practice of utilizing creative methods to engage students), or within one's personal SE practice (my previous work with engaging doctoral students (Taylor, 2011) is a precursor to my practices within the STEP project). To that extent, SE practices form an 'ecology' and meet the required criteria for an 'ecology of practice', that is: they 'travel', they obtain within networks, they are nested within other practices, and they seem to possess an 'energy' for a certain duration which is realized in historical spatial sites and temporal conditions. However, whether SE practices (and that is *practices*, not individual people) 'behave like living things' is a moot point, and one which, for me, moves precariously close to reification. However, the most theoretically generative aspect of 'practice architectures' in terms of student engagement may be found at what I earlier called the most 'grounded' order of practice – the 'saying, doings and relatings' of everyday educational practice – as the following illustrative empirical example from the STEP project demonstrates.

The participants' practices (that is, the students' and my own) were evinced in the 'saying, doings and relatings' which formed the everyday 'life' of the project; it was these that made the project happen in the unfolding 'here and now' of the time and space of the project's occurrence. The 'sayings, doings and relatings' produced the 'horizontal' practice of student engagement in the exploration of transitions and student experiences within the project. It was these that gave it its particular dynamics, interactions and relationships, and these which gave rise to forms of solidarity, identification and dis-identification which had immediate and perhaps longer-lasting effects for student identities, values and educational understandings. For example, in her reflexive interview (Stage 4) one student said:

> When I started uni I like poohed myself! I remember when I first moved in I used to get really upset and cry and I used to be like "mum, I don't want to be here anymore".

The painful transition experience that Lucinda discloses here does more than just say how she felt, it also expresses how she saw herself (as a small, needy and perhaps uncontrolled child), the primary social relationship she relied on for emotional support (her mum), and her trust in my educational relationship with her, in that she felt able to discuss these rather wounding experiences so directly. Another participant, Sarah, spoke of the 'heart-felt glimpses' the project provided into the students' experiences of transition. Such 'glimpses' formed the tangible and intangible micro-level minutiae of the project in all its granularity and heterogeneity and helped produce what Raymond Williams (1977, p.132) called a 'structure of feeling', that is:

> 'Meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt … characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity'.

The particularity of the 'structure of feeling' which imbued the STEP Project was situated within the critical-transformative-participatory-dialogic practice strand of SE as I have already outlined above, and I think one can see in Lucinda and Sarah's open dialogue about affects, relations and emotions an instantiation of this strand of SE.

These 'horizontal' levels of 'sayings, doings and relatings' mesh with the 'vertical' aspects of culture and discourse, of the social and political, within the project's structure of feeling.

Furthermore, the part played by 'vertical' material-economic factors was intimately connected to the structure of feeling of the project and the 'inside' of its unfolding logic: the one-year gap between Stages 1 – 3 of the project and Stages 4 – 6 a year later was not a planned but a chance occurrence, as the latter three stages were initiated as a result of a departmental invitation to obtain a second 'follow-up' grant. It was because of the dialogic and participatory nature of the project that *we* – the students and I thinking and planning together – could turn this surprising and fortuitous event from haphazard chance into advantageous research practice through the collaborative design of three new stages which built developmentally, creatively and in increasingly reflexive ways, on the three earlier stages. In this, the emerging research design of the STEP project provides a nice instance of how the 'orchestration' (Kemmis *et al*., 2008) of practice – that is, the joint generation of practice though social action by a group of participants in space and time, rather than by individuals, who as individuals cannot create practice – links up with the 'reflexive-dialectical' (Kemmis *et al*., 2011) element of practice to illustrate how practices are creative, generative and change-making.

While the project's distinctive 'structure of feeling' – its teleo-affective dimension – was important in providing an ongoing sense of purpose and belonging for participants, I now want to consider the ways in which this aspect of the STEP project was intimately related to how it worked as a form of *phronesis-praxis* and here the concept of a 'practice niche' comes in quite handy. As Kemmis and Heikkinen (2011, p.16) confirm 'many aspects of the niches of practices do not occur in the absence of human agency but as a result of it'. My aim is to consider how the STEP project worked as a *phronesis-praxis* niche. What I mean by this is that the project as niche was located within a site, place and space within which the sayings, doings and relatings of its participants were linked with a discourse, a materiality and a socio-politics, and that these elements together created a particular site ontology – a way of being and becoming for those involved. It is my contention that the site ontology of the STEP project was one of *phronesis-praxis*, a mode of being and becoming formed in relation to judgement which arises from practical knowledge; and that this site ontology gave participants the means think reflexively, individually and collaboratively, about our practice as researchers and project participants, and act with greater discernment in these roles. In what follows I explore the dimensions of *phronesis* and consider *phronesis-praxis* through specific empirical examples from the STEP project, but I start with a brief introduction to the terms *phronesis*, praxis and *phronesis-praxis*.

Phronesis, Praxis and the STEP Project

The term *phronesis* is now fairly widely used in discussions of educational research, although it is used in a variety of different ways. *Phronesis* is a Greek word used by Aristotle to denote a form of social inquiry based on principles of good sense, prudence, wisdom and good judgment. One of the strongest contemporary advocates sees *phronesis* as a form of 'social commentary and social action' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.60), motivated by an often painstaking uncovering of the entrenched interests and values of policy- and decision-makers. The purpose of *phronesis*, in Flyvbjerg's

(2001) view, is that it gives educationalists and researchers a way to 'speak back' to power; and as such accords a new moral purpose and force to social inquiry. As a reflexive practitioner with a long-standing commitment to providing epistemological space for the expression of students' voices (Taylor, 2009), I have a growing sense of *phronesis* as an ethical orientation to research, as a moral space for a form of partisan inquiry in which researcher and participants are research allies in a horizontal-democratic-dialogic relationship, and as a philosophical undergirding for my positionality as a feminist post-structuralist researcher. It seemed to me that *phronesis* fitted well with the 'critical-transformative' strand of SE in general and the research practice generated within the niche of the STEP project more particularly.

For Aristotle, *phronesis* is the capacity to reason well in order to act well in everyday practical situations. In Thomson's translation of *The Nichomachean Ethics* phronesis is 'prudence … to be able to deliberate rightly' not only about what is 'good and advantageous to himself … but what is conducive to the good life generally' (Aristotle, 1953, p.150). It is 'the capacity to think well for the sake of living well' (Schuchman, cited in Noel, 1999, p.274), and for Butler *et al.*, (2000, p.265) *phronesis* 'includes both theoretical and practical forms of wisdom'. However, it is specifically the thinking or 'contemplative' aspect of *phronesis* which Kemmis (2010) finds troubling when thinking about practice. His argument is that 'we find ourselves distanced from praxis in phronetic research' (p.16) because the deliberative, rationalizing and contemplative aspect of *phronesis* inserts a gap between thought and action which consequently situates the phronetic researcher at a 'distance' from praxis. In contrast to Flyvbjerg (2001) who sees *phronesis* as directly entailing a form of 'social action', Kemmis (2012, p.3) characterizes *phronesis* as a '*disposition* towards wisdom and prudence' (my emphasis), albeit a disposition that can 'guide', 'inform', and 'orient' praxis. Praxis, on the other hand 'is the action' – the 'sayings, doings and relatings' referred to earlier and which sit at the heart of practice architectures. Praxis is 'happening-ness', it is in praxis we submit ourselves to reality and are cognizant that we are inserting and/or committing ourselves into history. It is these aspects of praxis which, according to Kemmis (2012, p.4), give praxis primacy over *phronesis* in understanding practice. Although Kemmis acknowledges the 'blurriness' of the phronesis/praxis boundary, it is his view that '*phronesis* cannot be understood outside of its relationship to praxis', because it remains in the realm of virtue, as a disposition, a contemplative orientation, or a willingness to learn from experience.

In thinking through the STEP project as an example of the practice of student engagement, and in considering the research practices used within the project, the distinctions between *phronesis* and praxis have been incredibly useful as reflexive heuristics in helping me unpack the relationships between thought, dispositions and actions. Having said that, I want now to propose an alternative formulation, one which does not relegate *phronesis* to a position separable from, 'below' or as 'minor' to praxis, but as instead entangled with it and, as such, as vitally connected to questions of epistemology and ontology, of what research means and how we do it, and what and how it means in the doing of it.

Karen Barad's (2007) 'diffractive' methodology proposes a way of thinking differently about discourse and materiality, mind and body, self and society, ethics and action. Her proposition (derived from quantum physics and developed in relation to human and nonhuman consciousness and social formations) is that separate entities

with determinate boundaries do not exist. Through the concepts of 'intra-action' and 'entanglement' Barad argues that objects and subjects do not exist outside or before intra-actions; they only come into being through intra-actions; and that all agencies (a term Barad uses in order to dispense with the binary differences implied by 'object' and 'subject') are produced through entanglements. Taking seriously these arguments about 'agencies' and their mutual constitution through 'intra-action' and 'entanglement' gives us the potential, Barad argues, to redefine our understandings of, and relations with, others, the world, and ourselves. Because we are all – always and in all ways – active intra-acting participants in a dynamic, open-ended becoming then 'ethics cannot be about responding to the other as if the other is the radical outside to the self' (Barad, 2007, p.178). As she explains:

> There is no such exterior observational point … We are not outside observers of the world […] rather we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity.

Which leads her to argue that:

> Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated … we know because we are *of* the world.

And then to propose that:

> What we need is something like an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being (Barad, 2007, pp.184 – 185).

These are provocative ideas and, while I do not wish to claim that Barad 'solves' or provides a way out of the major (praxis)/ minor (*phronesis*), or disposition and contemplation (*phronesis*)/ action (praxis) debates, her concepts are generative for thinking about *phronesis* and praxis in a somewhat different way. In the next section I take up Barad's concepts in relation to specific instances from the STEP project.

'Each intra-action matters': *Phronesis-Praxis* **Entanglements within the STEP Project**

Because the world – and ourselves as agencies – are constituted through intra-active entanglements then, in Barad's (2007, p. 185) view, 'each intra-action matters'. The usefulness of Barad's statement to the STEP project becomes clear in the light of Noel's (1999, p.274) contention that the origin and departure point for *phronesis* as a form of practical reasoning or wisdom is the question 'what should I do in this situation?' In order to explore this, I draw on three incidents from the project which, in different ways, originated with the question 'what should I do in this situation?' Each incident provides insights into the entanglement of disposition, thought and action, and discloses something about what it means to act phronetically and how one learns to do so.

Kemmis (2012, p.3) is surely right in asserting that 'phronesis is not something that can be taught; it can only be learned, and then only by experience. To the extent that phronesis can be taught at all, it can only be taught indirectly'. The first incident occurred at the very beginning of the STEP project, in the first meeting with all nine participants. After I had outlined Stage 1 and explained that in Stage 2 we would

invite participants to use visual methods in an open way to represent 'transition', the following exchange took place:

> Sarah: 'So, you've got £3000 for this project? What are you going to spend the money on?'
> Carol: … (I smiled as the sketchy budget plan for the project popped into my head).
> Sarah: (very seriously) '£3000 is a lot of money'.
> Carol: 'Yes, you're right … there's costs for interview transcriptions, DVDs, memory sticks, but a large portion of it is for some of us to attend a conference'.
> Sarah: 'How much is the conference?'
> Carol: 'Well, about £1500 in total'
> Sarah: (incredulous) 'What, just to talk about what we've done?'

My staff colleague and I then spent some time giving the details of the budget and taking pains to explain each item in relation to both how academic knowledge is produced and disseminated through research, and the value of the project in terms of students' engagement. Afterwards, I reflected on how discomfited I had felt by Sarah's question and that this was traceable to my experience of it as a public 'calling to account'; it was the first time a research participant had ever asked that question and the first time I had ever had to explain a project budget to participants. While the disclosure of budget details derived a) from my practical knowledge of the importance of open dialogue from previous student voice projects, and b) from the momentary judgement that honesty is an important pre-requisite in fostering a sense of collaboration within a research community where no questions are off limits, I can only claim discernment in retrospect. In its experiential and sensory now-ness, this instance of intra-action was an enmeshment of practical action ('saying and doing'), with a communitarian moral imperative ('relatings'), with a research practice ('doing'). I don't think this instance can be unraveled as either *phronesis* or praxis, except in *post hoc* rationalization. For me, it is best apprehended as *phronesis-praxis*, as part of the 'ethic of answerability' (Bakhtin, 1986) within the project, in line with the 'collaborative model for teacher and student relationships' of which Lambert (2009, p.299) speaks. Such an ethic may entail a phronetic impulse to do good but it cannot, as Kemmis (2012) notes, guarantee that good will result, so I have no way of knowing the 'impact' of this incident. As an instance of *phronesis*-praxis my unarticulated aim was that it would infuse the structure of feeling of the project with a participatory ethic.

The second incident is from the beginning of Stage 4 of the project and concerns Katrina's comment that the joint conference presentation (Taylor *et al*., 2009) at the end of Stage 3, had made her feel:

> Very, very nervous at first because there were all these bigwigs, all these doctors and professionals and people who know more than us [but it] was good, the actual fact that they were interested in us as much as they were in you.

As I see it, this incident captures Katrina's momentary felt experience of her agency. It is a recognition of the reconfiguration of hierarchies effected during the life of the project, as well as a moment of self-recognition of her own credentials as a becoming-

academic. Significantly, these recognitions are produced relationally, and are recognized as such. Katrina is 'making herself up', to use Hacking's (2004, p.287) phrase, in the 'intricacies of everyday and institutional life', and she is doing so intra-actively, relationally and in a process which mutually constitutes herself, me, the 'bigwigs, doctors and professionals'. Katrina's felt experience of her identity as not unified, fixed or stable, but mutable, is momentarily solidified in what and how she tells this account which helps her to 'secure an identity story' (Woodward, 2002, p26). This brief extract (Katrina's 'saying') intimates what or who she is becoming ('doing'), and what she is becoming is *phronimos*, a person who acts with practical wisdom ('relatings'). 'The wise and prudent person also recognizes that to have an experience is to be formed by it' says Kemmis (2012, p.10). Katrina's expression of 'interest' from 'doctors' and 'professionals' was not a promotion of self-centred self-importance, but a mode of thinking-knowing-being (in an entangled *phronesis*-praxis) which she was already using in the service of others through her ongoing commitment to the phronetic life of the STEP project, through collaborative presentations and an academic article. In this reading, Katrina was on the way to embodying virtues which, 'are necessarily those most useful to others' (Kristjansson, 2005, p.469).

The third incident concerns the formulation and agreement of the 'ground rules' for the Writing Workshop (Stage 6). All participants collaborated in drawing the ground rules up on day one, they reflected on them overnight, and added two more on the second day. While this collaborative process illustrates that 'it is in practice that *phronesis* is developed and in practice that it comes into play', it also points to a more specific claim that *phronesis* 'is about understanding and behaviour in particular situations' (Thomas, 2010, p.4). Noel (1999, p.279) refers to this as the 'situational perception and insight interpretation' of phronesis, in which it is attunement to the multiple details of a situation which matters. For Thomas (2010, p.4) the value of *phronesis* is that works as a means to understand situations and social actors in all their particularity, locatedness and specificity; *phronesis* helps to produce knowledge of contexts and persons which accords value to the 'malleable, corrigible […] provisional, tentative'. In its offer of 'exemplary knowledge' in all its contextual specificity, it stands in opposition to generalization and induction. These understandings help us see the 'ground rules' incident as an instance of the dialogic emergence of *phronesis-praxis* instantiated in the collaborative social act of practical wisdom. The 'rules' encoded ethics ('give feedback tactfully'), research practice ('have a supportive peer review process'), ontology ('write what *you* want to write'), and epistemology ('all drafts will be shared and we will give each other constructively critical points for development'), and as such are an instance of what Barad earlier calls an '*ethico-onto-epistem-ology*', an intertwining of ethics, knowing and being. This also draws a line back to Flyvbjerg's (2001) articulation of *phronesis* as a form of social inquiry based on principles of good sense, prudence, wisdom and good judgment. The 'ground rules' make no clear distinctions between knowing, being and doing. In one sense, the 'ground rules' could be seen as *phronesis* guiding praxis – as discernment guiding action – but this is a false binary. The 'ground rules' were produced intra-actively in the workshop; they were hung on the wall and invoked regularly, not as a corrective to behaviour but as an affirmation of collective agreement, and on occasions even as a celebration of their happening-ness in the now of the moment; they were recognised as mutable and provisional and so were revised and added; but most of all they were specific and meaningful (as 'sayings, doings and relatings') to the here-and-now research and student engagement practice of those three days. It is this situated particularity, and the exemplary knowledge of

participatory research practice within the specific dynamics of the STEP project it gestures to, that makes the 'rules' an important instance of *phronesis-praxis*. They demonstrate well how 'practical learning varies with the context of a practice' (Thomas, 2010, p.4).

Conclusion

This paper has focused on student engagement as a field of practice and on instances of research practice within a specific student engagement project. The discussion has had four main threads. First, it considered student engagement as a field of practice with three distinctive, although often interrelated, strands. Second, it drew on Kemmis's conceptual framework to explore student engagement as a practice architecture composed of sayings, doings and relatings which hang together in more or less distinctive patterns and which give coherence to practice in action. Third, it examined the STEP project as a *phronesis-praxis* niche and fourth, the paper drew on Barad's concepts to explore instances from the STEP project as exemplars of entangled intra-active *phronesis*-praxis.

The paper has aimed to draw attention to student engagement as a rich and variegated field of contemporary educational research and practice. One key argument has been that student engagement is currently articulated within three different models of practice, each of which call on different discourses and each of which is underpinned by different concepts of teaching, learning, research and educational practice. After outlining student engagement in its 'improving teaching and learning' and 'measurement and accountability' models, the paper puts forward a case for paying greater attention to the insights and benefits of the 'critical-transformative' strand of student engagement practice. From this I argue that it is its basis in dialogic relational modes of engagement which imbue this strand of SE with ethical import.

The paper then reviewed various theorisations which provide analytical purchase as tools for thinking about student engagement practice. Kemmis *et al.*'s (2011) concepts of practice architectures, ecologies of practice, and practice niche were considered in relation to instances from the STEP project. This discussion provided the grounds for my contention that what matters in student engagement practice is the creative and dynamic agency of individuals' enactments of the discursive-material-sociopolitical practices within which they are embedded. It is only through these enactments that student engagement is brought to 'life' as practice and its specificity revealed. The paper then deployed Barad's (2007) provocative concepts of intra-action and entanglement to think through instances from the STEP project. My argument here is that Barad's concepts are useful in elaborating an alternative understanding of *phronesis-praxis* as intricately entailed in affective, embodied, mindful and particular socially-situated student engagement practices. From this I propose taking up Barad's radical '*ethico-onto-epistem-ology*' as a means to contest the separability of disposition, reflection, thought and action in student engagement practice. I argue the case for understanding student engagement within the STEP project as a form of critical-transformative participatory *phronesis-praxis*, in which practical knowledge and practical wisdom are entangled. Overall, then, the paper forwards an argument for the advantages to be gained from student engagement practices which, in Flyvbjerg (2001) words, work as a form of 'social commentary and social action' and which, in doing so, may contest the increasing hegemony of the marketisation of higher education

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