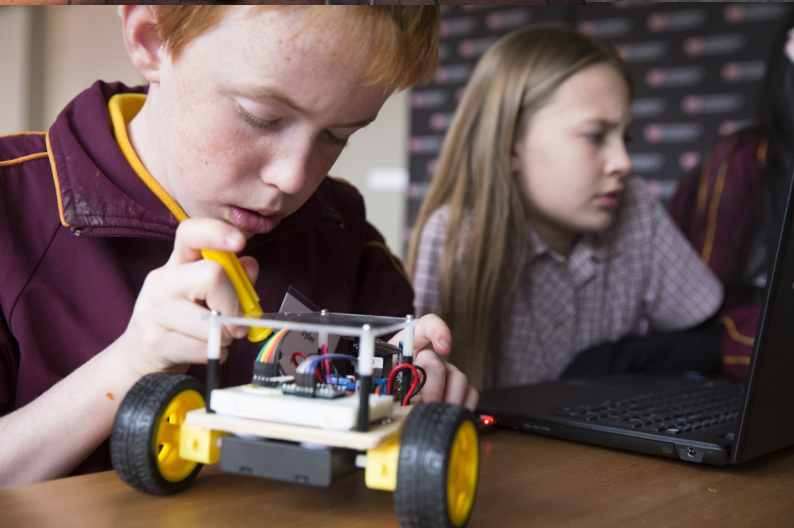




Peter Underwood  
Centre

# Engagement with Learning



UNIVERSITY of  
TASMANIA



Tasmanian  
Government

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Professor Julian Sefton-Green for his provocation paper (included here as Part 1) and for his collaboration with the Peter Underwood Centre throughout 2018 as Visiting Scholar. The University of Tasmania has enabled Professor Sefton-Green's work with the Centre with financial support through its Visiting Scholarships Scheme.

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## The Peter Underwood Centre

The Peter Underwood Centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian State Government in association with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania.

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## Our Visiting Scholar

Julian Sefton-Green is Professor of New Media Education at Deakin University in Melbourne. He has worked as an independent scholar and has held positions at the Department of Media and Communication, London School of Economics and Political Science and at the University of Oslo working on projects exploring learning and learner identity across formal and informal domains. He has been an Honorary Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK, and the Institute of Education, Hong Kong, and he is now a Visiting Professor at The Playful Learning Centre, University of Helsinki, Finland.



Professor Sefton-Green has been the Head of Media Arts and Education at WAC Performing Arts and Media College - a centre for informal training and education - where he directed a range of digital media activities for young people and co-ordinated training for media artists and teachers. Prior to that he worked as Media Studies teacher in an inner city comprehensive London; and in higher education teaching undergraduate and postgraduate courses, leading teacher training degrees in media education.

He has researched and written widely on many aspects of media education, new technologies, creativity, digital cultures and informal learning and has authored, co-authored or edited 12 books. Recent volumes include *The Class: living and learning in the digital age* (New York University Press 2016) and *Learning Identities, Education and Community: young lives in the cosmopolitan city* (Cambridge University Press 2016). He has directed research projects for the Arts Council of England, the British Film Institute, the London Development Agency, Creative Partnerships and Nominet Trust and has spoken at conferences in more than 20 countries.

With funding support from the University of Tasmania, during 2018 Professor Sefton-Green is working with the Peter Underwood Centre as a visiting scholar. The program of work for the visiting scholarship draws on his expertise to enrich and expand the Centre's work on its strategic pillar of "Creativity and Engagement for Learning", with three specific sets of activities:

- A strengthened and enriched program and framework for the Centre's engagement activity, including through the A-Lab which offers a creative, technology-enhanced learning space for children and young people, as well as relevant adults.
- Engagement with Tasmanians working in creative, innovative learning spaces through meetings and presentations.
- Development of a joint ARC Discovery application on the longer term social legacies of educational interventions for marginalised youth.

Professor Sefton-green wrote his provocation paper (see Part 1) in collaboration with Peter Underwood centre staff, as part of his visiting scholar program.

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# Part 1: Terms of engagement. A provocation paper about engagement with learning for the Peter Underwood Centre

## Professor Julian Sefton-Green

Professor of New Media Education, Deakin University  
2018 Visiting Scholar with the Peter Underwood Centre

## Why Engagement?

"Engagement" is part of an everyday vocabulary commonly used to describe a key dimension of our relationship with learning. It is often used in concert with a suite of emotionally powerful terms like "interest", "motivation", "attention", and "concentration" to encapsulate a kind of shared common sense to explain a range of behaviours. In the current Tasmanian Department of Education's strategic plan<sup>1</sup> engagement is a key term, alongside access and participation. Archetypal instances that might serve as comprehensive images for engagement with learning include:

- The child absorbed in the story book her or his parent is reading.
- The group of students collaborating to conduct a science experiment.
- Young people comparing notes about a new computer game they're exploring.
- A class of students all concentrating on an assignment.
- Young people urgently discussing a sculpture in an art gallery.

These examples show that engagement with learning can occur anywhere, in formal, non-formal or informal learning contexts. While there is widespread agreement about the importance of engagement, describing the meaning of engagement in words is complex and contested. Nevertheless, adults as well as children and young people themselves are all comfortable with recognising when they are, or are not, engaged with learning.

The Peter Underwood Centre is seeking to describe what any 'terms of engagement' might consist of, as a way to improve life opportunities for young people in Tasmania for the better. This is of particular importance to the work of the Centre because:

Research from around the world consistently shows how young people from low-income families are excluded from the sorts of learning and community opportunities that offer precisely the kind of engagement (it is argued) that they both want and need.<sup>2</sup>



## From metaphors of engagement to the terms of engagement

Perhaps the most common use of the term engagement is in the phrase "engaged to be married". There are several dimensions of this use that we can fruitfully expand. If we want to make learning engaging we need to understand that engagement includes elements of commitment, choice, mutuality, futures and public pronouncement.

Engagements are announced because getting married is important in civil society and has consequences beyond just the individuals involved. By the same token, engagement in learning needs to be far more widely discussed between and within families, communities, educators, and children and young people themselves. All these different parties' interests need to form part of an ongoing conversation.

Choice and commitment are clearly key features of engagement. In formal schooling, it is counterproductive for engagement to be an hierarchically imposed demand<sup>3</sup>. Engagement cannot be mandated and requires ongoing maintenance: contemporary understanding of interest-led learning and young people's diverse educational experiences require that it is the practices of engagement that are explored and moderated rather than just reproducing a notion of a singular attention to more "exciting" versions of curriculum content.

Engagements also involve an element of mutuality: both parties are engaged to each other. By the same token, it is not acceptable to characterise engagement as exclusively a passive property of children. It needs to be something that children and their (formal and informal) educators create together. In formal education settings, there is increasing attention to how materials are used, activities are framed and enjoined, and the balance of different kinds of activity within learning experiences in order to enhance engagement. In the non-formal "Connected Learning" model<sup>4</sup>, engagement is not a mode of transmission where the learning provider engages the student nor the responsibility of the learner to be engaged regardless of the experiences offered – but rather it is a form of co-constitution of practices that are rooted in young people's interests and ways of understanding the world.

Finally, it is the marriage, not just the engagement, which is important. If being engaged is simply the prelude to the more important event, then we need to prioritise long-term benefits rather than pay disproportionate attention to immediate experiences. The drive to "edutainment" in a range of curriculum materials (from early childhood to university) has drawn attention to the ways that the actual classroom can be more or less engaging as a social experience<sup>5</sup>. Importantly, a focus on engagement also draws attention to longer term timescales<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, one of the key features of studies of boredom and resilience is precisely the ways that learners learn how to set aside short-term dis-benefits in favour of longer-term perspectives.

For engagement to be a useful concept in education it needs to draw on this more contractual notion of a relationship. We want to see deep engagement in learning that itself is authentically engaging. To achieve this end, we need ways of talking about what engagement could mean, how to achieve it and ways of measuring it that will help everybody who has a stake in learning.

## The counterfactual

Like many "folk theories" or common-sense explanations of how we think and how our minds work<sup>7</sup>, it is often the opposite that guides our definitions. Because education is such a complicated social process and because its consequences determine life-opportunities, these counterfactual terms tend to be used as proxies for the ways that institutions (families, early care and education, schools) fail some children and young people.

In some ways then, we might know the disengaged better than we know the engaged. But even disengagement is a catchall term. It can refer to a perceived failure on the part of the individual – a kind of social or moral weakness – or the inability of learning experiences (or curriculum or pedagogy) to genuinely include significant swathes of the population. It can describe deep-rooted attitudes towards the value of learning in general – as in the ways that communities disengage from the value of schooling – or it can simply describe misbehaving during a lesson, or it could even suggest how the latter (misbehaving) can lead to the former (seeing no point to the value of education) or vice versa.

For all the frustrations with the term, engagement is persistently used because the consequences of being disengaged (the counterfactual) are severe, significant and clearly measurable, in terms of social outcomes. The concept is thus open to being used as a form of deficit labelling, especially by educators for whom engagement is seen as the responsibility of the student rather than the educational ecology. Engagement thus becomes a form of casual explanation for deep-rooted educational failure because it can so simply be associated with a number of negative outcomes. Moreover, the question of agency in engagement – whether it suggests an attitude or a failure on the part of the student or indeed whether it is the result of active practices led by the school and the teacher – is central<sup>8</sup>.

For the idea of engagement to be useful, we need to move beyond the counterfactual and deficit view – as well as beyond the rhetorical and the commonsensical. We need, especially, to know how the concept might enable us to develop practical interventions and measures of and for success, because:

Engagement is not conceptualized as an attribute of the student but rather as an alterable state of being that is highly influenced by the capacity of school, family, and peers to provide consistent expectations and supports for learning [...] both the individual and context matter<sup>9</sup>.

## Dimensions and practices

In scholarly literature about engagement in school-based learning, the concept is usually seen as including behavioural, cognitive and emotional dimensions<sup>10</sup>. In schools, engagement is often related to external behaviours that are seen to indicate internal mental states of mind. Frequently measures for being engaged are understood in terms of "null" hypotheses. Thus, high attendance rates, completion of homework, punctuality and so forth, all the ways in which schools conventionally function, are used as proxies for engagement. In terms of the cognitive and emotional dimensions, individual psychological qualities and habits expressed in terms like "drive and motivation" or "self-beliefs", "attitudes towards school" or a "sense of belonging"<sup>11</sup> are used as indicators of engagement.

Commonly agreed practices to promote engagement in school include project-based learning, high quality of student-teacher relationships, focused training and preparation in initial teacher education and continuing professional development, the active monitoring of student engagement, classroom observation and professional collaboration and indeed the ways that feedback and appraisal are both built into everyday practice for both teachers and students<sup>12</sup>. In non-formal learning, opportunities for civic engagement, connections with children's and young people's communities and wider life worlds, and active choice and input are often highlighted<sup>13</sup>.

These practices suggest ways in which engagement can be clarified, measured and understood as key features of learning environments; and need to be built into the ways that learning is identified, understood and appraised.

## Authenticity, interest and commitment

Discussion about competition for attention across modes of learning now situates young people's interests in a "life-wide" perspective, looking at learning at home, with friends, in out-of-school centres as well as at school<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, in the U.S., the "Connected Learning" research network has built theory, practice, design and policy around this key insight<sup>15</sup>. In this model of learning, engagement often begins in out-of-school, interest-led, and (frequently but not exclusively) digital participation. Formal learning settings can draw inspiration from such genuinely authentic, interest-driven forms of engagement on offer elsewhere.

One of the key developments in learning science over the last 20 years has been research that extrapolates broader notions of learning than simply performance in school perhaps well summed up in the principle of "learning to learn"<sup>16</sup>. The Connected Learning research exploring young people's work in non-formal learning and after-school environments, and in games and other forms of virtual online communities, argues for schools and teachers to be able to design and build progressive curricula and modes of pedagogy that develop these forms of participation.

The model builds on young people's commitments forged elsewhere but it is not simply a form of child-centeredness; more a process to enable young people's engagement itself to be taken seriously and logically as a starting point for building good learning relationships. There are implications here for curriculum, pedagogy and indeed the ways that schooling intersects with young people's learning trajectories – frequently rooted in the logics of their own circumstances<sup>17</sup>. Any measures of engagement need to take into account out-of-school learning of this sort in concert with in-school practices.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://documentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/DoE-Strategic-Plan-2018-2021.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Sefton-Green, J. (2006). *New Spaces for Learning: Developing the Ecology of Out-of-School Education*. <https://www.unisa.edu.au/Documents/EASS/HRI/working-papers/wp35.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Zyngier, D. (2008). (Re)conceptualising student engagement: Doing education not doing time. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(7), 1765-1776.
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- <sup>5</sup> <https://grattan.edu.au/report/engaging-students-creating-classrooms-that-improve-learning/>
- <sup>6</sup> Lemke, J. (2000). Across the scales of time: artefacts, activities, and meanings in ecosocial systems. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 7(4), 273-290.
- <sup>7</sup> Olson, D. R., & Bruner, J. (1996). Folk Psychology and Folk Pedagogy. In D. R. Olson & N. Torrance (Eds.), *The handbook of education and human development: New models of learning, teaching and schooling* (pp. 9-27). Oxford: Blackwell.
- <sup>8</sup> See: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/studentengagementliteraturereview\\_1.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/studentengagementliteraturereview_1.pdf)
- <sup>9</sup> Christenson, S.L., A.L. Reschly and C. Wylie (eds.) (2012). *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*. Rotterdam: Springer Preface, pp. v-vi
- <sup>10</sup> AITSL (2014). *Engagement in Australian schools*. Available: [http://www.centralrangesllen.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement\\_in\\_Australian\\_Schools-Background\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.centralrangesllen.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement_in_Australian_Schools-Background_Paper.pdf); Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Morizot, J., and Pagani, L. (2009). Adolescent behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school: Relationship to dropout. *Journal of School Health*, 79 (9), 408-415; Fredricks, J., Blumenfeld, P., and Paris, A. (2004). School engagement: potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 59-109
- <sup>11</sup> See for example the analysis in: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-III.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/studentengagementliteraturereview\\_1.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/studentengagementliteraturereview_1.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> Sefton-Green, J. (2006). *New Spaces for Learning: Developing the Ecology of Out-of-School Education*. <https://www.unisa.edu.au/Documents/EASS/HRI/working-papers/wp35.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> DiGiacomo, D. K., Van Horne, K., Van Steenis, E., & Penuel, W. R. (2018). The material and social constitution of interest. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2018.04.010>
- <sup>15</sup> Ito, M., Gutierrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K. et al. (2013). *Connected Learning: an agenda for research and design*. Cambridge Mass: MIT. See also: <https://clalliance.org>
- <sup>16</sup> Sinha, C. (1999). Situated Selves: learning to be a learner. In J. Bliss, R. Saljo, & P. Light (Eds.), *Learning Sites: Social and Technological Resources for Learning* (pp. 32-48). Oxford: Pergamon Press.
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## Part 2: The Engagement Project

### Peter Underwood Centre

University of Tasmania

## Our History

Launched in February 2015, the Peter Underwood Centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government in association with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania. The Centre is the tangible expression of the Making the Future Partnership Agreement, and was founded with the full support of the University Council.

The Honourable Peter Underwood AC (Tasmania's 27th Governor) began the conversation with the University of Tasmania that led to its creation, and we are honoured that the Centre bears his name. Mr Underwood was a passionate believer in the transformative power of education and held the conviction that the most important infrastructure of any nation is an educated and functionally literate population.

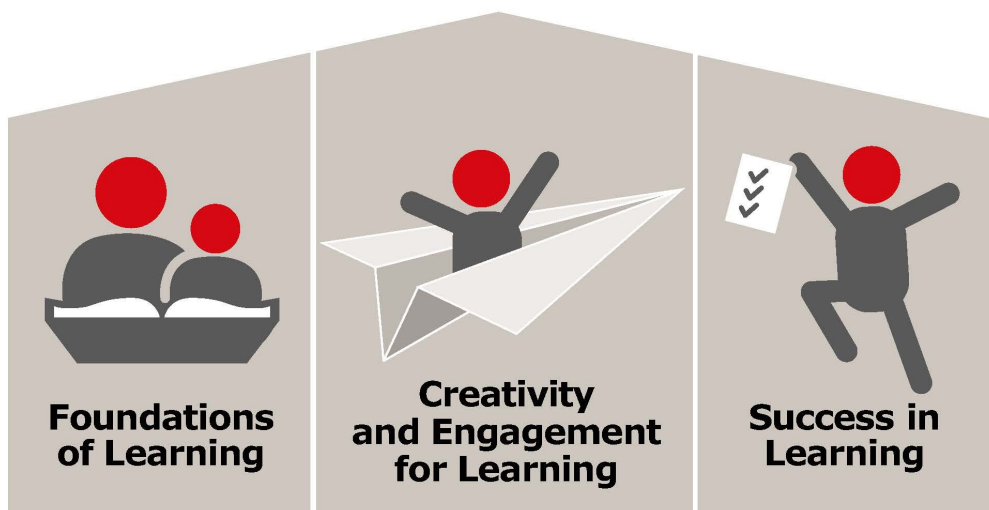
Mrs Frances Underwood is the Patron of the Peter Underwood Centre.

Our Advisory Committee was established in November 2015, under the leadership of Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC, Governor of Tasmania.

*"Education perhaps more than anything else is a passport to a better life."* - Peter Underwood

## Our Vision and Strategic Pillars

**All young Tasmanians flourish  
through the transformative power of learning**



## Where to next?

On 12 September 2018, the Peter Underwood Centre convened a high level Round Table, hosted by the Chairperson of its Advisory Committee, Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner, AC, Governor of Tasmania.

The purpose of the Roundtable was to commence a broader discussion about one of the priority areas of activity and focus for the Centre during the next 3-5 years – engagement in learning.

A group of interested and interesting people, from a range of disciplines and backgrounds, were invited to be part of the discussion to discuss the benefits and limitations of the concept and the potential to enhance engagement in learning in Tasmania. The group included academics, health professionals, the judiciary, not-for-profit organisations, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers from across government.

Visiting Scholar Professor Julian Sefton-Green presented a provocation paper [Part 1] about engagement with learning.

The concept of engagement in learning was identified as having productive and generative dimensions of the concept – particularly when situated inside the wider social envelope of communities, families and societies. However, the concepts essential slipperiness and its relationship to conflict was also noted.

The Round Table considered the following questions:

- What does it look like when a child or young person is really engaged with learning?
- What are the preconditions for engagement in learning?
- How do we know people are engaged with learning? How might this be measured?



## The Manifesto

The Peter Underwood Centre and the Department of Education are collaborating to develop our work on engagement in learning.

Based on conversations with various stakeholders, and informed by relevant literature, the Peter Underwood Centre will develop a Manifesto for Engagement with Learning based on four questions:

- What are the characteristics of engagement with learning?
- What are the preconditions for engagement with learning?
- How can engagement with learning be fostered?
- How might engagement with learning be measured?

The Round Table has begun these conversations. We look forward to further input from our stakeholders to help answer these questions.

The engagement in learning project is being supported by a joint working group. The next phase of work will be scanning and assessing the field. From this foundation phase, a project plan with embedded evaluation, will be devised with implementation beginning in 2019.

## **Peter Underwood Centre Manifesto for Engagement with Learning**



## **Our warmest thanks for your contribution to the Roundtable**

Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner, AC, Governor of Tasmania.

Mrs Frances Underwood, Patron, Peter Underwood Centre.

Associate Professor Clair Andersen, TILT, University of Tasmania.

Ms Jenny Burgess, Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Performance, Department of Education.

Ms Janet Carding, Director, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Ms Talitha Davidass, Entrepreneurship Facilitator, The Van Diemen Project.

Chief Magistrate Catherine Geason, Department of Justice.

Ms Melissa Gray, Director, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Professor Julian Sefton-Green, Visiting Scholar.

Mr Matthew Healey, Executive Director, Communities Tasmania.

Mr Stuart Hollingsworth, Director, Skills Tasmania.

Professor Alison Venn, Director, Menzies Institute of Medical Research.

Ms Jodee Wilson, Deputy Secretary, Support and Development, Department of Education.

Mr Michael White, Director, MW Group Consulting Pty Ltd.

Dr Michelle Williams, Paediatrician, Tasmanian Health Service.

Ms Ebony Wood, Director Collective Education, Beacon Foundation.



*"Education perhaps more than anything else is a passport to a better life."* - Peter Underwood