Do university students fake learning? Notes from the field on student learning and engagement as a performative practice

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Abstract

Student-centered approaches to teaching and learning in higher education place strong emphasis on active engagement as crucial to successful learning. However, recent research has uncovered instances where students feign or simulate their engagement – essentially 'faking' the academic participation they believe educators expect. In this exploration, we delve into whether the student-centered ideal of participatory, embodied, and emotionally driven engagement inadvertently fosters 'fake learning'. Drawing on theories of performativity, we critically examine Macfarlane's (2021) binary understanding of 'fake learning', challenging the assumption that mere outward conformity to educator expectations necessarily contradicts genuine learning experiences. The following insights stem from a thought-provoking workshop centered on the theme of 'fake learning' in higher education. They are presented not as a linear argument but as a mosaic of voices, with only a select few representing our own research perspectives. By framing these perspectives as field notes, rather than a classic linear argument ending with a synthesis, we aim to highlight the diverse, sometimes contradictory, viewpoints surrounding learning and engagement as performative practices in contemporary higher education.

Keywords: student engagement; performativity; fake learning

Received 4 April 2024; revised version received 25 November 2024; accepted 2 December 2024. *Corresponding author: Laura Louise Sarauw, Roskilde University, Denmark. (sarauw@ruc.dk)*

Entry 1: A many-faceted inquiry

The aim of these notes is to encourage further critical inquiry into the student-centred approach to teaching and learning in higher education. There is currently an ongoing concern that students may at times simulate the level of active engagement anticipated by their educators. This raises the important question of whether this simulation aligns with the desired educational principles and norms,

or if it contradicts the fundamental tenets of student learning and autonomy, as articulated, for instance, by Macfarlane (2021). The notes are based on an open workshop on 'fake learning' held at the Danish University Pedagogical Conference in October 2021. The workshop included panel presentations and plenary discussions with a substantial number of participants, and in the present text, we have carefully curated their input alongside extracts from the wider field of theories on student learning, discussed on the workshop. Mirroring the workshop form, we have chosen a form of presentation, in which the various voices and perspectives that we encountered at the workshop weave in and out of each other in the light of more generalised ideas and discussions within the field of higher education research. This format mimics and explores a performative learning space, which is the focal point of the article: both the workshop, the phenomenon of performativity in student learning, and what education researchers should think about it are awash with incommensurable opinions and interpretations.

Rather than a classic argument with a clear problem statement, analysis, and conclusion, we present different perspectives in a form that allows us not to integrate and synthesize them but rather allows us to consider major ambiguities and dilemmas in the theory and practice of higher education. This means that we present a plurality of voices and perspectives which weave in and out of each other with no intention, on our part, of forming a linear single-pointed academic argument. In this way, the form of the presentation mimics the workshop format and allows an exploration of a performative learning space, which is the focal point of the article. The workshop had an exploratory character, which is difficult to capture in a classic scientific article structure with a clear beginning, middle, and conclusion. We therefore chose a form of presentation that we hope will capture the associative ambiguity that characterises the collective-exploratory character of oral debates (Ong, 2002; Petersen, 2016).

Our paper begins by presenting 4 different entry points to our topic, and from these, we raise two questions. We then present a number of different arguments and discourses, that address the idea of faking learning, from different angles, and hopefully lead the reader by the hand through an exploration of the differences and incongruent perspectives on this topic we encountered in our workshop.

Entry 2: From pandemics to questions of performativity

Amid the extended lockdowns prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, Danish

universities transitioned to predominantly online teaching. In a comprehensive study on online education, across nine higher education institutions in Denmark, several educators described their frustration with the sudden absence of observable cues such as body language, facial expressions, gaze direction, and expressions. One educator described his experience of the transition to online teaching as follows: "I did not have direct contact with the audience [the students], where I could follow how much they are involved. I didn't have 'signs' from the students. There, you grope your way more in the dark" (Georgsen and Qvortrup, 2021, p. 94).

Our starting point for the present inquiry is that the frustration, here expressed by the educator (above), offers valuable insights into the significance attached to student body language when educators find themselves evaluating the effectiveness of their teaching in times when they are not forced online. But should we in fact evaluate our students by their appearance? Macfarlane (2017, 2021) and others have problematised that some students consciously engage physically, cognitively, and emotionally, aligning their behavior with educators' expectations. He describes this tendency as 'fake learning,' thereby challenging the theory of student-centered learning and its understanding of active participation and engagement as unequivocal markers of genuine learning (we expand MacFarlane’s argument below). This brings us to the central question: Is there an inherent contradiction between learning and performance, as Macfarlane suggests?

Entry 3: Performativity and fake

Instead of arguing for a particular position or making a claim that one particular theory is comprehensive, this presentation has the advantage of seeking to maintain and problematize implicit assumptions and theories, in this case on the university pedagogical scene. Example: The everyday understanding of 'fake' as opposed to the 'real' or 'authentic' is often value-laden and judgmental. However, in our workshop, this distinction was far more ambiguous and complex and raised completely different pedagogical challenges and problems than if we limited ourselves to using the binary everyday language or distinction between 'real' and 'authentic' learning, where students are clearly guided by an intrinsic motivation versus 'inauthentic' or 'faked' learning, where students take on roles and produce gestures that they would not normally come up, with by themselves. Reading across multiple perspectives and voices, student ‘faking’ can be seen both as a modern version of the classic pedagogical notions that one learns by imitating others, as a reading of cultural norms and expectations in the learning space that literally

mirrors current university pedagogical trends, and even as a (class-specific) survival strategy.

Entry 4: After Method

Law writes in his book After Method that '... when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse and messy [...] it tends to make a mess of it. This is because simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent.' (Law, 2004, p.2). This became clear in our workshop. Specifically, if students do fake participation, engagement, and learning, perhaps this should not be understood as a malicious or dodgy study strategy. Perhaps it has more to do with the messy and self-contradictory relationship of being a student, and to studying, which is better understood by not reducing it to one meaning, normative direction, or form of reasoning. This might allow us, as researchers, to embrace several possible interpretations, each with its own forms of possible validity. A nonlinear form also aligns with understanding social performativity as a citation practice, in which, whether it is a matter of choosing education, dress, or university pedagogy, we largely simply 'quote' (Butler, 1990) dominant narratives or narrative repertoires (Lamont, 2016). Since what is quoted is usually taken as natural and given, it is rarely asked and discussed as something that could be different. But with student-centred pedagogy, as our example, the natural and given can and does accommodate several opposing interpretations. When we stage key presentations from the workshop below and mix them with theoretical perspectives, empirical impressions, and analyses from our own research, our texts constitute a performance of multiple perspectives on learning and performativity.

Question 1: Does student-centred pedagogy elicit fake performances?

In short, student-centred pedagogy focuses on what students *do* rather than what they *know* or *learn* (Biggs, 1999; Biggs & Tang, 2011). It is the students' behaviours or performance, that confirm that our teaching has succeeded. But a performance can be faked. Student-centred theories of teaching and learning are based on a constructivist approach that shifts the pedagogical centre of gravity from the educator to the student(s), and from teaching content to the students' learning processes. During the pandemic, as all teaching moved online, the longing for the bodily presence of our students and active engagement that many educators craved (Georgsen and Quortrup, 2021) stood as an indisputable sign of how entangled most

of us [educators] are with student-centred ways of thinking. Apparently, many of us are only assured that our students are learning if we can see them and see that they do something; we increasingly evaluate our teaching efforts through the feedback of students nodding, taking notes, smiling, asking questions, etc. A potential paradox here is that we may very well be simultaneously indicating how students are to behave if they want to be seen as engaged or if they want to fake engagement.

Question 2: Do you know Susan?

You may have met her in connection with your teaching, or maybe dreamed of meeting her there. The daughter of Australian education theorist John Biggs (1999), Susan embodies the student-centred ideal of the engaged student in many ways. The way Susan learns aligns with Swedish Marton and Säljö's (1976) concept of deep learning: She works purposefully and independently, she knows what she wants to do with her education, and everything she learns is important to her. She always arrives well-prepared for the lessons, participates actively by asking relevant questions to the educator, and actively reflects on her personal learning outcomes. According to her father, the goal of university education is to get all students to become like the academically determined, self-confident, self-motivated, and self-engaged Susan. Perhaps Biggs' fame in the contemporary mass university relates to the claim that any student can become a Susan if only their educators would organize their teaching around student activities (instead of lectures), whereby activity becomes synonymous with good and desirable practice. John Biggs and Cathrine Tang's 1999 book, Teaching for Quality Learning: What the Student Does, where the Susan figure plays a leading role, today informs the curriculum for most teaching and learning certificate programmes for educators in Danish universities.

Susan and the Bologna Process

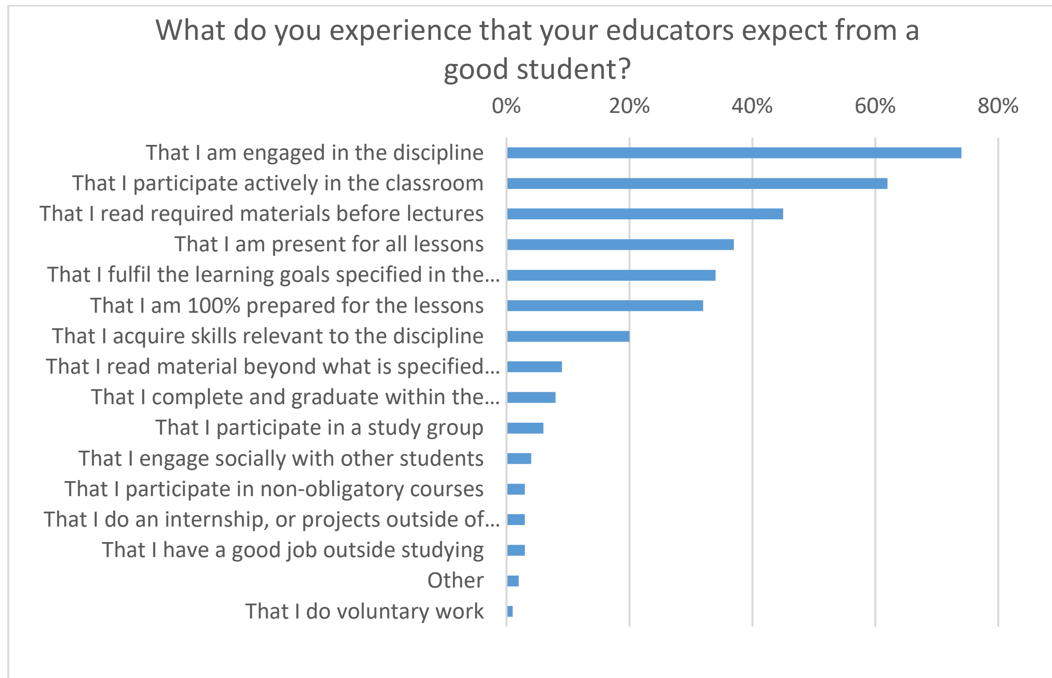
Susan was born in Australia the exact same year as the European Bologna Process (1999) was conceived. In many European countries, including Denmark the Bologna Process introduced a new outcome-oriented approach to curriculum and educational development. In Denmark and other Nordic countries, the introduction of learning objectives implied a shift within the student-centred paradigm. Learning objectives themselves are often seen as 'student-centred' because they emphasize students' learning (output) instead of a given content or curriculum (input).

Previously, student-centred learning was understood as enabling students to realise their potential, inspired by progressive pedagogy and Rogers (1969). Now, however, students are expected to aim for predefined outcomes. In the Danish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (2008), it is a requirement that students' learning outcomes are described within the categories of knowledge, skills and competencies - and especially the last two categories encourage forms of teaching that, like Biggs' ideal conception, focus on what the students *do* (Sarauw, 2011).

Discourse 1: Students in Denmark know that they must be like Susan

The exclusive focus on students' active participation and engagement has also made itself felt by students at Danish universities. Students in Denmark know only too well that they should behave like Susan if they want to obtain good grades. In a nationwide survey (Sarauw & Madsen, 2016), university students (n=4940) were asked what they thought their lecturers expected from the good student – the response frequencies are shown in Figure 1, below. As can be seen from Figure 1, a large majority felt educators expected them to be academically engaged (74%) and participate actively in teaching (62%), which was assessed as far more important than, for example, reading the curriculum (45%) or meeting the curriculum's learning objectives (34%). But does this mean that students are actively faking their engagement?

Figure 1. What students think their educators expect from them



(Sarauw & Madsen, 2016)

Argument 1: The performative turn in university pedagogy

In his book Freedom to Learn (2017), Macfarlane highlights the connection between the student-centred pedagogy's requirement that students visibly demonstrate physical, cognitive, and emotional participation and the emergence of the phenomenon of fake learning (Macfarlane, p.15). According to Macfarlane, the student-centred desire to cultivate students who behave like John Biggs' Susan encourages a meaningless exercise in anticipating the educator's expectations, and performing accordingly (Macfarlane, 2017, pp.33, 54, 91). Thus, a performance culture is fostered in which students pretend to participate and engage emotionally. Macfarlane is of the opinion that higher education should not encourage fake engagement, but rather autonomous thinking and, independent thoughts and interests. The problem is that students can produce the demanded performance, regardless of whether they learn something or not. It is possible to be physically present without learning, but it is also possible to learn without being physically

present. It is possible to talk to the educator without an actual professionally committed participation, just as it is possible to fabricate reflections and reflexive confessions that meet emotional demands for performativity without adhering to these values. Learning, in these cases, becomes a matter of appearance, of visible student compliance rather than authenticity, according to Macfarlane (ibid., p.102). Students fake, so to speak, what they consider educators to see as indicators of good learning, and that, according to Macfarlane, prevents what he understands as authentic learning.

Argument 2: Performativity as a meaningful study strategy

By performativity, Macfarlane understands educators decoding student behaviour as described in the introduction, namely "[Performative demands] refers to things that can easily be observed and measured and is based on a simplistic behavioural approach to understanding learning" (Macfarlane, 2017, p.15). However, learning can also be seen as a performative process, in which students necessarily adhere to certain norms of participation and behaviour. This notion of performativity contains a normative ideal about the independent and self-driven student. Macfarlane's ideal of students themselves choosing how and what they want to learn privileges students whose study strategies already adhere to this norm. This more sociological notion of performativity is, for example, found in the works of Butler, whose thoughts on performativity differ substantially from Macfarlane's. According to Butler (1990, 2007), humans are not born with a particular inner core, disconnected from social, linguistic, and material power relations. For Butler, identity is constituted through performative repetitions of stylized social, linguistic, and material categories and so there can be no one 'authentic' way of being a student or learning – they are all, in Butlerian terms, citations of social categories, which then reproduce these categories. Thus, our identity is always already a form of fake, something assumed or appropriated.

According to Butler, performativity is then a human condition rather than a normative judgment of, for example, our students. To that end, Lamont's (2016) concept of cultural repertoires can help us understand what it is that students perform and why. By cultural repertoires, Lamont means the narratives currently available to educators and students through the political, cultural, and institutional contexts. These repertoires limit and shape student identity because such narratives define what constitutes legitimate student identity. In other words, with Lamont, we would see students' faking of engagement and learning as a performance that – consciously and strategically – draws on a specific repertoire of contemporary

cultural narratives about being a student in contemporary society. With Butler and Lamont, there is no contradiction between performance and authenticity, nor between faking and learning. Faking may be a meaningful survival and self-protection strategy or an intermediate form in which new students tentatively acquire the codes, terminology, and cultural forms native to the academic discipline they strive to conquer.

Argument 3: The problem is the students who don't fake

In studies of the body in pedagogical conditions, Shilling (2010) and Stahl (2021) have pointed out that when normative body ideals penetrate school and education, body pedagogies arise. This means that the body is taken to be an outward expression – a performance - of health or class, through which the educator may observe whether the students outwardly meet these norms. This induces bodily self-monitoring and calls for several body modification techniques, where it is the bodily expression, rather than, for example, the health of the body, that is subject to modification. But this modified expression is easily perceived as fake – as an expression of an illegitimate body that is not natural, and thus expresses a desire to "rise above one's station", so to speak, by means of outward appearance.

Like the normative body ideals, norms of participation are evident in the students' consciousness – and we can easily translate the false, modified body into the falsified, inauthentic participation or commitment. We may then suspect that fake learning is an indicator of class just as body modification has a class component. The 'genuinely' committed student possesses a privileged familiarity with norms of students' behaviour, while the 'fake' commitment characterizes the student to whom these norms are foreign. This points to two important aspects: first, that the performance imitates not just a norm, but a dominant class norm, and second, that fake learning may be both an appropriation of the educational cultural norms – and a way of resisting them.

Resistance may consist of opting out of so-called 'authentic' educator-student relationships and opting out of exposing oneself. Macfarlane (2017, p.92) refers to a student who was required to write a reflection essay in which the student had to deal with negative stereotypes in his family, e.g. racial or gender stereotyping. The student did not want to expose such personal circumstances to his educator, and therefore fabricated some stories that satisfied the educator, while allowing the student to avoid exposing himself. With Shilling and Stahl, the student's faking, however, appears as a form of self-defence, for the student who is not comfortable in the educational culture but does not want to rebel manifestly

against it. The student imitates the dominant norm and therefore helps maintain it but is not interested in taking this norm upon himself. Based on the example, one may therefore ask whether we should not turn our attention to those students who do not fake - either because they already know the educational cultural norm, thereby reproducing their privileged access to educational culture, or because they are not at all aware of the norm, which they may inadvertently violate and thus risk marginalisation?

Discourse 2: Mimesis and learning

In several group interviews (Frederiksen & Fenger, 2021), we presented students with a goal statement from their curriculum:

> Interviewer: What do you think when you read it? <laughing>What do you think, Student 1?
> Student 2: Just a lot of requirements [giggle]
> Student 1: I think it is, but you can make everything fit it, really, so it's very easy to get yourself to meet the requirements. [...] It's very easy to get it to be pretzelled because it's very vaguely worded. These things you must. It sounds fancy, but it's very much like that, yes. [...]
> Student 3: yes, that's how I felt about those knowledge and skills goals that I thought, oh, shit how am I going to get around all of this? But where I felt like, yes, okay, but with that one activity I actually fulfil an incredible number of them, if I argue well enough, then you can get it twisted to fit.

This interview excerpt is an example of fake learning: The students experience that what they have dealt with in a module project must be 'twisted around' so that it fits with a (according to the students) meaningless and vague curriculum formulation. In other words, the learning objectives of the curriculum do not function as goals, in the sense of something that is aimed at and that the students in the interview seek to fulfil as meaningful expressions of their learning. Instead, the learning objective takes on the character of a post-rationalisation – the project and the formulation are twisted and reinterpreted generously, until they connect. Conversely, however, the interview excerpt can also be read as an example of learning: The foreign and vague technical language in the curriculum is sought to be conquered and processed, and in the actual reinterpretation of the project and goals, the student acquires some of this professional language and its meaning.

One can fake something in an attempt to acquire it. To imitate something,

one does not understand in the attempt to conquer it is a notion of learning that one can find in both classical learning theories such as Piaget and Vygotsky and in the form of mimesis in the Frankfurt School's critique of the Enlightenment, as well as more practical and musical-artistic pedagogical traditions. These positions share a rejection of the idea that learning takes place in a sequential order in which the student's understanding of the subject matter precedes action or engagement. Understanding does not necessarily precede appropriation. So, when the interview excerpt above sounds like strategical faking, it mirrors the implicit assumption that learning must progress logically and orderly, from simpler to more advanced taxonomic levels. But learning can have other forms and processes, and when both educators and students themselves understand the above example as an expression of fake, is it perhaps just an expression that the notion of learning as a logically ordered and targeted process is still dominant?

Discourse 3: The educator's gaze

In a similar group interview, two students discuss their educator's requirement that they evaluate each other:

> Student 1: No, I also don't like having to evaluate each other. I find that a little strange. We have done a great deal. It's super weird.
> Interviewer: Evaluate each other? On submissions or?
> Student 1: Yes, assignments, we've had to read each other's assignments because the educator says we don't have time for it, so you have to do it. Totally strange.
> Student 2: No, but so do we, and it's really fun with what groups you actually get [...] some good feedback or something you can actually use for something, and [other groups] just takes the task as bullshit. No one hears what we are saying anyway, so nothing really good will come of it. Nor something you can actually use for something. But then what you do is you just pretend.
> Student 1: Yeah, no one in our class, I think, has opened those feedback assignments and actually read each other's feedback. We've all agreed that we think it's strange and that it's […] not our position to sit and judge each other. [...]

This example, which is from (Frederiksen & Fenger, 2021), can be read as an example of students actively devising a strategy where they avoid becoming each

other's assessors, even though it is the task assigned to them, presumably a variation of the popular peer feedback tasks. Here, faking is a survival and protection strategy, even a collectively agreed strategy or ‘fake it till you make it’. But we can also read the example as a translation of the way their educator has communicated the assignment to them – the educator ‘does not have time for it’, so ‘they must do it’. However, the students will not accept this assignment – it is not them, but the educator who is the authority, and it is the relationship of authority that makes their learning meaningful, which in turn points to the expectation of logically ordered learning moving downwards from authority, as a dominant assumption of learning among students.

Discourse 4: Be careful not to demotivate the educator!

A student speaks in this interview (Frederiksen & Fenger, 2021) about raising one's hand for the sake of the educator:

> I often think there are too few people who raise their hands. That is, it demotivates the educator, and they [the educators] stand there and think, well, is this something you want to do? Uh, just try to get-in-the-fight-like (...) I also think there are many types who don't bother to dive into it. Where I am one of them, I also want to dive into it, I want to learn something, I want to get as much out of it as possible. [...] But sometimes also when there are - and I am going to go on a tangent - sometimes when questions are also asked, or something is explained. I also just need time to get it to sink in, so it may well be that my questions come later, because it's not right there (...) so if you think a little slowly like I do, it probably also takes a little longer at times.

The student talks about their own student identity and that of their fellow students through the narrative of engagement, and the educator's need for commitment. On the one hand, the quote gives the impression of a student who completely lives up to the image of Susan – she is committed, wants to participate, wants to go in-depth, and wants the same commitment from her fellow students. On the other hand, the student may just be reproducing the ideal that they feel the educator demands. When, as in this quote, students worry about whether their educator will be demotivated, it is not only the interest in learning that drives engagement.

This can be seen as a kind of facework, in Goffman's (2004) concept, where the educator's demand for engaged participation translates into a need for the

educator not to lose face. While the student is, in a way, exactly the student that the educator seems to want, her comment that the student's lack of commitment has a demotivating effect on the educator can be seen as a reproduction of a widespread narrative about the engaged student, as Lamont and Butler would argue aids and shapes the students' performative expression.

Discourse 5: Closed cameras

One educator writes this about their longings for signs of learning during lockdown:

> There's not a sound besides me talking. Not a gently questioning grunt or an "mmm" assuring me that you are processing the fabric. Not a cough or a yawn that lets me know of your presence. Loneliness is not the only feeling associated with the absence of faces and sounds – uncertainty follows: Are you preoccupied with the academic material and the activity we are doing? Do you experience meaningfulness in the academic focus of the teaching and my didactic choices? [...] The students and the educator have always stayed in the learning space for different reasons, participated with different intentions, and fulfilled different roles and responsibilities. When I'm preoccupied with your failure to activate the camera, it's also about my urge to see you. Thus, when I argue that activating your cameras will strengthen your learning, it is an understanding that calls for nuance, because perhaps the argument is mostly based on my needs. (Lindelof, 2021)

This quote expands the narrative of the engaged student from the educator's point of view. When educators feel challenged by online teaching, it is because it makes it difficult to observe bodily performativity. The educator cannot tell if their students are active and is frustrated by the lack of bodily response, which they usually use as confirmation that their teaching is running as it should. The quote states that if students are absorbed in teaching and experience meaningfulness, it must be expressed in language, commitment, and participation. But at the same time, the educator behind the quote has an eye for a contradiction between who, how, and why respectively, the educator and the students are in the online lecture room.

Discourse 6: Children's and adult's language

The quotes above point to particular narratives about the engaged student and to the

fact that the understanding of what the students should do when they study at university is largely colonised by a pedagogised language. This language may shift the attention away from the 'case', ‘subject matter’ or exploration of academic themes and questions (understood as what we before Susan's time called 'the content of teaching') towards articulating and emphasising certain forms of participation. In the 1970s, students in early childhood education programmes were taught to distinguish between speaking a children's language and an adult language – the children's language was for speaking to children and focused on communicating the matter in the activity in question, a linguistic medium for practicing pedagogy. The adult language was for speaking to adults and focused on the technical, educational, and pedagogical motives behind the activity – a linguistic medium through which pedagogy is debated. Perhaps students might be too good at speaking and mimicking the pedagogical adult language, in a variation of reflexive modernity, where students become increasingly aware of themselves as members of the abstract category students. In contrast, the content of the teaching and the students’ exploration and immersion in their discipline may not have a similarly clear language in the world of education. The competent child has had learning goals since nursery, and throughout their upbringing, they have learned to evaluate, speak, and understand themselves from this pedagogical adult language. It is the adult language that is their constant and which represents continuity through changing educational contexts and interchangeable 'cases'. Adult language is a crutch to cling to when you are new to the university and triggers quick and effective confirmation from your lecturers. But when students navigate strategically in learning objectives, in the expectations of the educator, or even set up Potemkin villages and pretend to give each other peer feedback, we can also read it as an expression that they have correctly deciphered that these things do not really belong in their learning. Rather they are an adult language about didactics and educational thinking that seeps into the classroom which they need not take at face value. Here, faking is a sensible filter that sorts out extraneous didactic artifacts.

Openings and closings of pedagogical ambiguities

In these notes from the field, we have examined ‘fake learning’ as a phenomenon worth discussing from different positions and points of view. We have made use of a nonlinear form and multiple voices and perspectives, to accentuate the complex, and rarely discussed, pedagogical ambiguity that deals with what students *actually do* when they study, and what educators might demand when they seek to measure or gauge the success of their teaching. This ambiguity is more complex than the

binary categories of fake versus genuine learning found in MacFarlane's analysis. This complexity includes inequalities in access to performing the 'good student', but at the same time, faking may be both a way of overcoming these inequalities and a way of managing, surviving, or even resisting the demand for performing particular student identities. This way, faking one's learning may also be a way of learning. This ambiguity does not necessarily make us wiser about what is right or wrong, good or bad teaching practice, but perhaps it tells us something important about the languages we have available as educators and students – about what we take for granted in the student-centred paradigm, where student participation and engagement are automatically taken as an expression of learning; where pedagogical ideals of active engagement seem closely entangled with a continuum of faking strategies that are simultaneously shaped by and shape pedagogical relations and normatively based questions about what we call 'learning' in higher education.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend their gratitude to the invited speakers: Professor Eva Bendix Petersen from Roskilde University, Peder Hjort, Head of Teaching Centre for Humanities at the University of Copenhagen, and PhD Fellow Simone Mejding Poulsen from the University of Copenhagen. We also wish to thank all other workshop participants for their invaluable intellectual contributions.

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