

## *Debatt*

# **The Unsustainable Illusion of Interactivity**

*Niklas Vallström & Özgün Imre*

*Kristianstad University, Department of Business*

Interactivity has become a cornerstone of modern pedagogy, with educators striving to create dynamic learning environments where students actively interact to challenge and develop new ideas (Wenger, 1998), while at the same time leading to higher motivation, a better understanding of the content, and developing soft skills (see e.g., Sung & Mayer, 2012; Kent et al., 2016). This trend has given rise to pedagogical, student-centric innovations such as the "flipped classroom", "gamification", and "entry and exit tickets". Kristianstad University (HKR), like many other similar higher education institutions (HEIs), has also embraced this approach.

To illustrate, in the previous issue of "Högskolepedagogisk Debatt", it was argued that the introduction of AI leads to less interaction between students and educators, resulting in feelings of loneliness (Faraon et al., 2024), and reduced interaction between students and their engagement with academic literature (Eklöf & Nilsson, 2024). These findings painted a bleak yet possible future consisting of a diminishment of the interactivity between lecturers and students. In the same issue, it was also suggested that interaction is possibly the key to unlocking students' learning (Furenbäck et al., 2024), aligning with the current "interaction" climate.

This idea of interaction can be found in different aspects of HEIs. Using HKR as an example, it is inherent in how the university defines quality by describing it as the situation where learning and teaching emerge in the interaction between the teacher, student, and the teaching environment (HKR, 2022, p. 2), as well as in HKR's core values where students

should find a social context that supports learning and where education should be characterized by flexible and student-centered teaching methods that enhance students' long-term learning (HKR, 2020, p. 2-3). In other words, the motto *interaction equals learning* is institutionalized and becomes a key aspect of our journey toward creating socially sustainable learning environments that ensure inclusivity and accessibility, making it our mission as lecturers to facilitate interaction among students and between students and instructors to enhance learning.

But we all know that, in reality, it is not easy to achieve a learning environment characterized by interaction, as students often seem to see no value in engaging with their peers or instructors. Students may perceive interactive activities as redundant or unnecessary, questioning the need to discuss topics that they have already mastered on their own. But where does these students' disengagement come from? Why are they disengaged?

This reluctance among students to interact may reveal a fundamental flaw in the assumption that all forms of interactivity inherently enhance learning. While we acknowledge that interactive teaching methods can indeed foster collaboration, communication skills, and learning, we have concerns that an uncritical and naive outlook on "interactivity" constrains teaching. In this debate article, we offer a critique of "interactivity" by drawing upon the concept of "interpassivity."

Building on Pfaller (2017), Bradshaw and Andehn (2023) utilize the concept of "interpassivity" to deconstruct students' disengagement. Interpassivity denotes a form of delegated enjoyment or engagement, where individuals delegate their engagement to external processes, appearing active while remaining passive. This concept helps us explore how supposed engagement often masks a deeper disengagement in educational settings. Within the context of HEIs, interpassivity appears when students engage in group work or lectures without genuine involvement, merely performing expected behaviors. For instance, students may nod along during seminar discussions without engaging, rely on peers in group work, and attend lectures without taking notes.

Aligned with Bradshaw and Andehn (2023), we argue that HEIs' institutional structures and incentives perpetuate student interpassivity and disengagement. When considering the authenticity of learning interactions between students and lecturers in our classrooms, it becomes evident that what may appear as interactive exchanges of ideas and perspectives is a mere facade. For instance, the pressure to seem engaged in interactive activities may prompt students to engage performatively to meet the lecturers' expectations. The students' interaction in seminars is tainted by the mantras "Am I saying what the lecturer wants to hear?" or "Is the comment I made enough to pass this seminar?" This performative engagement not only undermines the authenticity of interactive experiences but also fosters a culture of superficiality and disengagement.

We argue that this is due to HEIs' desire to foster student interactivity characterized by interpassivity rather than engaging in genuine conversations with students. Even when educators attempt to adapt and incorporate students' voices, the overarching institutional framework — characterized by rigid syllabuses, predetermined learning outcomes and assessment methods, and standardized course designs — often limits the scope for meaningful interactions. For example, a classroom discussion might reveal a consensus among this course's specific student group that a take-home exam would better suit their learning compared to the course's planned classroom exam. However, the detailed syllabus and strict assessment guidelines in place at HKR leave little room for such flexibility. In this context, students may perceive their interactivity as performative rather than meaningful, reinforcing a culture of interpassivity where they feel their voices have little impact on their learning experiences. Thus, instead of fostering genuine, adaptive dialogue, the rigid institutional structures uphold a façade of interaction, reducing student engagement to mere box-ticking exercises that serve institutional needs but not the students' learning processes.

In conclusion, we must challenge the prevailing assumption that all interactivity inherently leads to better learning outcomes. More importantly, we need to rethink what interactivity means for both lecturers and students. We also want to encourage HEIs to eliminate their institutional straightjackets, such as overly detailed syllabuses, so educators

can foster an environment that moves beyond superficial and inauthentic classroom interactions. This shift will counter interpassivity, paving the way for interactivity that is engaging, genuine, and meaningful.

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