



USING COUNTER-STORY TO INCREASE BELONGING IN AN HEI: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF POSTERS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE INSTITUTIONAL HABITUS

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This paper narrates one story and two counter-stories in its exploration of the extent to which posters can have an impact on staff and students' sense of belonging within higher education institutions (HEIs). It argues that within a context of increasing marketization, most HEIs have carefully re-aligned their public images to match their student profiles, showing inclusivity and diversity on their websites and within social media. However, attention to their visual academic image (Masiki, 2010) has not automatically extended to the posters on display within the universities themselves. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, this paper discusses the negative impact of some posters and the messages they convey about privilege, entitlement and belonging, especially to minority staff and students. The possibilities of using posters as a means of providing counter-story to such narratives is explored as well as their potential to increase a sense of belonging to the organisational culture.

Keywords: Posters, Counter-story, Sense of belonging.

Introduction

It is recognised that globally, HEI's are required to increase student numbers, within the context of diversification of HE and its marketization (ONS, 2016). Students are more likely, than ever before to seek quality experiences that meet their needs as consumers of HE (Mathews, 2017). Within this changing landscape, it becomes imperative to maximise student engagement. High levels of student engagement have been associated with high levels of belonging. This may include students feeling that they and their chosen university are a good 'fit' academically, but also in terms of feeling accepted and valued there (Thomas, 2012). This paper considers a hereto neglected aspect of student and staff engagement: the extent to which the visual academic environment in the form of posters, can contribute to student and staffs' sense of belonging to their institution.

This paper reflects on the evolution of a series of poster exhibitions on display in two different corridors of a UK university over a period of six years, questioning their impact and significance. The author uses an auto-ethnographic approach to explore the impact that the different posters had on her and the messages they possibly conveyed. She suggests that one set of posters, whose narrative was one of inspiration and aspiration, inadvertently excluded many sections of the staff and students. In response to this, the author created her own set of posters in an attempt to create a counter-story to the first set. Here, she explores whether it is possible for posters to contribute to increasing a sense of belonging to an organisation and thereby the wider institutional and cultural habitus.

Context

Posters as a Means of Cultural Change

Analysis of the use of visual methods to effect change remains an under-researched area (Clark and Morriss, 2017). However, its proponents emphasise its capacity to offer alternative ways of understanding, and subverting ‘established routes of distribution of power in organisations’ (Schrat et al, 2012) and thereby its ability to show aspects of life that can be under-estimated or concealed.

Visual research methods can enable the familiar to become strange, and so open it up to new possibilities of interpretation (Mannay, 2010). Researchers have used visual methodologies such as photo-voice, photo-documentation, drawings, calligraphy and paintings to present alternative perspectives and realities of minority or marginalised communities (Clark and Morriss, 2017). Images can communicate multiple narratives.

By the same token, those in power have regularly harnessed the impact of the visual medium to propagate their ideologies. Cant’s (2012) analysis of Agrarian Reform posters in Velasco’s Peru found that the posters used complex propaganda and symbols to encourage social participation in the reform. She quotes Evans and Donald as stating that posters are “an exceptional visual form in that their function and design are geared to instant comprehension by a large proportion of the population”.

Moore (2010) looks at the evolution of posters to promote propaganda in the both World Wars, in the Russian Revolution and Chinese Cultural Revolution. He found that the stunning posters used images, bold colours, and slogans that created what continue to be regarded as works of art in their own right today. These were posters that had a huge emotive impact, but also provided a sort of ‘corporate identity’ to its citizens as their underlying purpose was one of propaganda.

This idea is used routinely in business and large corporations as a way of unifying the workforce, and presenting cohesive strategic aims and vision. Using visual media effectively in the workplace has been shown to increase social interactions and connections between workers as well as increasing emotional well-being (Smiraglia, 2014).

With the increasing marketization of higher education, it is something that HEIs will increasingly need to come to terms with. Masiki (2010) calls this academic visual identity and refers to the importance of linking cultural, organizational, technical, and leadership priorities in a cohesive way that visually projects the right message to staff and students.

Student Engagement and Belonging

This is interesting territory for HEI’s especially when it is linked to the issue of student engagement and belonging. Thomas (2012) found that whilst eight percent of students left HE during their first year, as many as 42% considered doing so. With students continuing to carry ever greater financial burdens around their education, they are more likely to see HE as a means to greater employability and themselves as consumers of it (Neves, 2016). This will also affect their engagement with HEIs.

It is worth unpicking the term ‘student engagement’, as it may mean different things to different people. Krause (2005) points out that students who are not engaged, are also not necessarily disengaged but may be feeling ‘inertia’ as a response to an HE environment that is alien to them. The Higher Education Academy (2010) differentiate between behavioural engagement (where students are attending and conforming to behavioural norms and expectations), cognitive engagement (where students go beyond curriculum requirements for the sake of learning and their sense of being stimulated by it) and emotional engagement (where students seem to be interested in their studies, and have a sense of belonging to the HEI). Students who feel ‘at home’ or a sense of belonging to their HEIs, who feel accepted, and included by educators, their peers and the institution as a whole are more likely to feel engaged (Thomas, 2012).

As HEIs within the UK (but also globally) have expanded rapidly in the last fifty years (ONS, 2016), this has placed increasing pressure on them to create more inclusive curricula and also reduce the attainment gap between White British (WB) compared to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, as well as working class students and students with disabilities or statements of support need (Hughes, 2016).

Bernard et al (2014) cite research from Hussein et al showing that the three most common BME groups who are most likely to fail in the UK, compared to their counter parts are black Caribbean, black African and Pakistani. The reasons given for this included the fact that their experiences as black people were not recognised or valued. For them, the curriculum remained Eurocentric. However, it was noted that a racial composition of staff teams that reflected the student population tended to have a positive impact on learning outcomes. Similarly, disabled students were shown to be over-represented in failing academically and on placement. Hidden disabilities such as mental health difficulties were not likely to be declared as students felt marginalised and stigmatised.

Bernard et al (2014) note that research around lesbian, gay and bisexual students focussed not so much on the progression of these students, but more on the direct and indirect discrimination they experienced during the course of their studies. They refer to the ‘deficit oriented discourses’ of the three groups of students and how their ‘experiences and histories were rendered invisible or negatively valued’ leading to them being ‘othered’; and how this created additional pressure on them to keep themselves motivated.

It could be postulated that this sense of being ‘othered’ is experienced by some staff as well as students. In the UK, only 8.3% of academic staff are from BME backgrounds (and only 2.9% are senior managers). Women also remain significantly under-represented in senior management positions (ECU, 2015). This is both a cause for concern for staff and students, but also for the wider institutional culture or habitus.

Counter-Story and of Student Engagement

The concept of counter-story may be helpful here. The everyday stories that we experience through all types of media, cast by those in authority, construct the narrative that forms the fabric of our lives. A counter-story is the lived experience of the marginalised (Delgado and Stefancic, 2013; Akhtar, 2016). It is the lived experience and story of marginalised students and staff and their journey through HE.

Counter-stories can be used as theoretical, methodological and pedagogical tools within HEIs (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). For example, Currant (2015) uses the concept of counter-story as a strategy to cultivate a sense of belonging for black students in a predominately white university.

It is suggested here that many UK HEI’s currently propagate an academic visual identity that is Eurocentric and male in its interpretation of success. This area remains to be researched, but has the unintended consequences of ‘othering’ everyone else. However, if HEIs were able to reflect the full range of staff and students, and their counter-stories within the medium of posters, this could be a helpful way forward in increasing a sense inclusivity and belonging.

In the next section, the author narrates her experience of a male Eurocentric visual display within the university and its impact on her. In the following section she describes collections of posters that she has designed over six years, and relates the counter-stories related to them. As the author uses an auto-ethnographic approach, she would like to declare her social location: she is an Asian woman (of Pakistani origin), a BME senior lecturer within a British university, but also a qualified social worker of over twenty five years. She teaches in the Department of Social Work and Social Care.

A Corporate ‘Story’ and a Rude Awakening

In 2012, a collection of posters was put up along a wall of one of the buildings in the university, showing images of alumni from different professions. At first, I welcomed the images, as I thought that they would

undoubtedly be more interesting than the blank wall that preceded them. The display was in a building that I often lectured in. I found myself walking past the display several times a week. After a while, I became aware of feelings of unease as I approached the wall. Then I found myself looking away from them, so I didn't have to look at any of the people in the posters. I realised that I was growing an aversion to them. That actually, I did prefer the blank wall, after all.

The display was corporate in style, consisting largely of executive-looking white men, in suits, making statements about their time at the university. Out of a collection of about twelve posters, there were only two of women, but their images were in the same vein as their male colleagues.

It is not my intention to criticise any of the alumni in the pictures or to belittle their very real achievements, nor to disrespect the people responsible for the display. My intention here is to report back on the feelings the display evoked in me and to reflect on how it may have impacted on others, and the learning we can gain from this.

When I stopped to consider my growing aversion to the display, I realised that it was simply because every time I walked past the posters, I felt alienated by them. They represented an ideal that was completely outside of my personal or professional experience. It was not that I resented the achievements being shown, or the people. It was just that the narrative being told (of white male alumni getting senior executive positions) was so different to my own world, that I had no way of relating to them. It seemed to me that an image was being presented about the university that I just could not relate to. I could understand, and also hope that many of the graduates leaving the university would go on to achieve such positions, whatever their gender or ethnic origin. But I also surmised that many would not. That success meant different things to different people. What I objected to was the narrow definition being displayed here – one that held no place for me.

I felt 'othered' by the story being narrated here. After a while, as often happens when one is 'othered', I began to chastise myself for being too sensitive to a simple poster display. I decided to go along to the corridor and take a good long look at the posters. I had been deliberately not looking at them for so long, it was possible I was blowing the whole thing up, out of proportion.

I stood at one end and slowly walked up and down the corridor. As I did so, something interesting happened. I saw various colleagues, passing by, who took it upon themselves to make unsolicited comments to me. It was clear that whoever they were, they felt as 'othered' by the posters as I did. Far from over-reacting, it seemed that my reaction reflected that of some others.

It was ironic that a collection of posters that had been erected to generate positive feelings about one's HEI, perhaps even a sense of belonging, was actually having the reverse effect. This highlights the complexity of academic visual identity (Masiki, 2010) and the importance of getting it right.

In the next section, the author discusses her use of counter-story in developing a range of posters over a period of six years. It will be argued that although the posters had specific themes that they overtly addressed, the underlying purpose of the posters was one of telling counter-stories to maximise inclusivity and increase a sense of belonging. She goes on to question whether her counter-stories succeeded, or just became another tool to exclude some at the expense of others.

Two Counter-Stories

The local community was running a story-telling festival. I decided to create a poster exhibition that would celebrate social work, which at the time was being pilloried by the press after the death of a toddler, Peter Connelly (Jones, 2012 and 2014, Warner, 2016). (In the UK, social work as a profession is not as respected as it perhaps is in other countries.) I was concerned about the negative impact of the vitriolic media campaign was having on the morale of social workers generally, and specifically the social work students that I taught. For example, a survey at the time showed that a third of social workers were considering leaving the profession (BASW, 2012).

I interviewed a number of people, wrote up their stories, and designed the exhibition that came to be called 'Stories into Social Work'. As I noted in the introductory poster, my aim was to present the back (counter) stories of a range of practitioners showing 'how they came to enter a profession that is often

discussed, but little understood' (Akhtar, 2013). I interviewed some eminent scholars, but also a range of '(extra)ordinary' practitioners, all of whom had one thing in common: they had practised for at least ten years (but often for over twenty).

I mapped their career pathway and showed what inspired them and kept them motivated in hard times. Like many life stories, these were inspiring, showing our human capacity and determination to fight against social inequality and effect change. For example, a teacher in Romania is told she has a new class to teach, consisting solely of children from the local orphanage. As the weeks go by, she is so moved by their plight, she gives up teaching to train to become a social worker. She goes on to work in Romanian orphanages, before coming to the UK and developing an expertise in engaging with young people with mental health issues.

Or, there was the scientist who took a maternity break from her PhD and started volunteering as an interpreter (in the 1970's). She was shocked at the lack of services available for women unable to speak English, so she set up the first Asian mother and toddler service in London and the third women's refuge for those fleeing domestic violence.

I was lucky enough to interview a scholar who had been trained by Clare & Donald Winnicott, John Bowlby, Melanie Klein, & Anna Freud: seminal educators that created the foundations of the social work profession as we know it today. Her education had truly been history in the making. The student, Olive Stevenson, went on to make her own mark in the profession (Stevenson, 2013).

But the stories were not always about success. One of the most popular posters was titled, 'Cornishman becomes a Professor after failing 'A' Levels'. This was the story of Professor Ray Jones who, as a student failed his 'A' levels. While re-sitting them, he did some voluntary work in a hostel for people who are mentally and physically 'handicapped'. He became fascinated by this and soon, this led him to question his dream of following in his father and grandfathers' footsteps. 'I loved it and changed my degree from Geology and Geography to Social Work and Sociology. It was a big deal at the time, as both my grandfathers had been Cornish tin miners...' he had explained to me, and I quoted in the poster (Akhtar, 2013). Perhaps this story, (like some others) reminded viewers of the posters, of our capacity for personal transformation, the old adage that a failure is not the whole story.

The posters also included practitioners who continued to practice for over thirty years, whose passion and need to be of service continued as a flame, buffering them against burn out.

This first collection was collated for the Kingston Connections Storytelling Festival (2013). The posters were exhibited as part of the Festival, and were on display at The Rose Theatre, in Kingston in June 2013. I enjoyed interviewing the different subjects, distilling their stories and creating their posters. As I did this, the work took on a life of its own. If the aim had been to provide a counter-story, then this worked. Those that came in contact with the posters welcomed them.

As the festival came to a close, I was surprised when the head of the department asked me to put up the posters in the departmental corridor at the university. Our course was being both internally and externally re-validated, and a huge blank wall needed to be filled, quickly. So, I did not anticipate the overwhelmingly positive response that followed as they became fresh exhibits to a whole new audience – to the staff, students and general passers-by along the corridor. The College of Social Work and Health and Social Care Professions Council also commented on them during their visit to re-validate our programmes. I was told that the posters were 'inspirational' and 'uplifting'. Students told me that the posters made them proud to be training into such an amazing profession.

After the re-validation process had been completed, I tried a few times, to remove the posters (they had been hastily attached with sticky-tape) but was told to leave them there, that some frames had been ordered for me; and by the way, when was I going to put up some fresh posters?

I must admit that I was befuddled and also alarmed at the expectation of me being a poster artist 'in residence' so to speak. I coped with it rather well, by going into a state of denial: the frames may never arrive, or someone else may well nab them. However, something happened, that inspired me to consider, once again, this idea of presenting counter-story as an act of subterfuge, as a way of highlighting an aspect of life within the scholarly community of the university that was not spoken about, but was an essential keystone of our daily life.

The second collection arose from an encounter I had with our IT person, Paul. I had been struggling with a range of IT issues and, despite my best efforts, had been unable to get them resolved. A chance encounter with Paul, transformed my working life. The following narrative (from the poster) explains what happened:

“Paul is responsible for all the IT stuff on campus, so he’s pretty busy, but always remembers my name. His mellow voice and slow gait belie a speedy efficiency. I see him in my colleague, Wilson’s office. I have a long list of technical problems that need solving and Paul is the man. I chat with Wilson while Paul does the techie stuff. Our raucous laughter attracts the attention of another colleague, Maria. ‘You guys sound like you’re having fun...’ She sees Paul and suddenly we no longer exist. ‘Oh, Paul, I wonder if I could have a word?’ ‘Oi!’ Wilson and I shout in unison. ‘OK’ she laughs, ‘I’ll join the queue!’ Good IT advice is hard to find. Paul doesn’t seem perturbed by the trail of enquirers. Finally I get my two minutes. I quickly go through the list. This is another thing I admire about him. I say it once and he gets it. He reels off solutions as I scabble about for pen & paper. I finish scribbling, look up to thank him, but he’s already disappeared, with a fresh stream of people right behind. So, I’ll say it anyway: ‘Thanks Paul, for all the solutions you provide, with effortless good will and friendly generosity. You are truly an unsung hero.’”

That’s how it happened, including the trail of people following him down the corridor. There was something in the generosity with which the help had been given that profoundly touched me. But actually, that was just Paul’s way. When I thought about it, Paul was always like that. And I could think of other people who, like him were unsung heroes within the university: always going beyond the call of duty, giving more than was required, because that was their nature.

The ‘Unsung Heroes’ collection includes staff within the wider university, such as our information advisor in the library, student and service user representatives, and of course, Paul. The favourite ‘unsung hero’ by far was Patsy, the longest serving member in the university’s kitchens, where she had served for over 30 years, whilst also caring for a sick and elderly mother.

Patsy was delighted with her poster and asked me to print some smaller versions that she could give away as gifts to relatives. She quickly got used to the stream of congratulatory, well-deserved comments about it and her. She has not quite forgiven me for taking down her poster and replacing it with another collection. But, she is too good natured to hold a grudge for long – I hope!

My intention with this collection of posters was to publicly display and express gratitude to ordinary students and staff within the habitus of the university, to thank them for essentially being themselves: unstinting, warm and considerate human beings. Their unconditional acts of generosity made a big difference to our daily lives, to our experience of being at the university. This was my counter-story. It was not explicitly stated anywhere, but the subtext was clear: we are proud of all the contributions made by students and staff that enable us to work and grow together. *That* is our definition of success.

By now, the posters had become embedded into the culture and the space that defined the department of social work and social care. Colleagues (from all parts of the university) and students expected to see them there. And I noticed that colleagues used them as a talking point, something to stop and discuss when showing visitors around.

It also became a regular occurrence for me to be stopped in the corridor, as I was passing, by a visitor to the university, who had become pre-occupied by a specific poster, and questioned me about it. (At first I wondered how they knew my name, but then I realised that they had seen my name and photo on the staff chart and connected it to the name on the posters.)

Challenges in Creating Inclusivity and Belonging

Another aside is worth mentioning here. I wanted posters that reflected the profile of the student and staff community within our department and wider university. However, I noticed that BME students were reticent and often declined the invitation to be included in the posters. I intuitively related to this. Although, by necessity, my name was on the posters, I had also shunned the opportunity of having my photo – my visual image in the posters. Putting the usual shyness aside, I felt there was something cultural about this attitudinal position. I have no hard evidence to back up this claim, but for me, there is something uncomfortable in putting oneself ‘out there’. It feels uncomfortable – culturally, it doesn’t sit well with me. It goes against the grain of who I am and how I have been brought up, as an Asian woman. I am sure this will resonate with people from many other collectivist cultures, where the individual is deemed less important than the collective (Hofstede, 2001).

This stance, of needing to remain in the background, presents as an anathema within western academia where the pressure is always on to make oneself as visible as possible. It is unsurprising that women and BME academics have suffered in their career progression as a result (Gutiérrez y Muhs, 2012; Yook, 2013).

Relating this to the student experience and to student engagement, I can understand some BME students’ reticence to appear on posters. In the ‘us and them’ environment where they may experience themselves as ‘othered’, to go against one’s cultural position of remaining in the background, within the invisible collective, risks one of being alienated from the ‘us’, from that very collective, and aligned with those in authority; those responsible for the ‘othering’.

A Full Circle Story?

This highlights the conundrum of representing everyone equally. In choosing one person, I had, by default excluded others. As the posters established their own reputation, I noticed that it began to matter to people about who was included in them and who was not. Over time, I began to receive ‘requests’ to do posters of specific people. I found myself in the inevitable position of good counter-storytellers: being noticed by those in authority. Counter-stories are powerful because they speak of those who are powerless. Telling their stories empowers them. Now those in authority saw the strength of the counter-stories, and asked me to ensure that the posters I made were aligned with the university’s strategic aims and priorities. At this point I wondered if my counter-story project was nearing its end, as there was pressure to subsume it into the wider corporate sphere of the university.

It was an important point in which to ask for feedback from members of my department, for whom I had primarily been doing the posters. Some people acknowledged how I had represented the diversity of students and how this was affirming for students to see. Off-beat, human and arty posters were the most popular. It was interesting to note that my counter-storytelling had not been as covert as I had envisaged. Some people said they approved of me steering clear of corporate pressures. The following quote from a colleague captured the essence of many people’s feedback:

‘I really, really love the posters you have displayed for us over the years, because I find them inspiring, but more importantly, help to create a sense of professional and university identity. It ‘names’ our physical space, projects positivity & inclusivity.’

Concluding Thoughts

The feedback I received was warm, generous and affirming. It mirrored the inclusivity, the sense of belonging I had been holding in mind when designing and creating the posters.

I am left wondering if I have succeeded in presenting a counter-narrative, or if actually, there is a danger of me buckling, under corporate pressure, to tow the official (story) line. Perhaps this is a fear that

the marginalised perpetually have: to what extent can they risk being fully seen, in the hope of being fully accepted? And how long does it take, for the previously invisible to assimilate, and to be accepted as part of the organisational culture once they are seen?

If I stop doing the posters now, will I undo all the work that has led up to this? Will I make invisible that which I have worked diligently in making visible? If I continue, can I link the posters to the university's strategic aims and priorities in a way that is authentic and honours the people in my latest selection of posters? I don't know. That chapter in my counter-storybook is as yet un-written.

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