

Visual Counter-Storytelling Toward Equity and Teaching

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Abstract: This poster demonstrates the value of visual representation as a vehicle for counter-storytelling which offers space to challenge dominant, deficit narratives and centralizes the historically marginalized voices (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). We discuss the use of graphic design and comic strips as a visual counter-storytelling to open up the conversation about marginalization and learning in the context of teacher education, in order to envision equitable design of learning opportunities.

Conceptualizing visual counter-storytelling

In the current field of the learning sciences, a growing body of scholarship brings forth critical perspectives on power and identities in relation to learning and design (e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Vakil, McKinney de Royston, Nasir, & Kirshner, 2016). In this poster, we add to this discussion by proposing visual counter-storytelling as a medium to envisage equitable design of learning opportunities, in the context of teacher education.

Counter-storytelling informed by critical race theory offers space to challenge dominant, deficit narratives and centralizes the story and voices of historically marginalized groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling challenges the deficit master narrative that overemphasizes and individualizes the deficits of non-dominant students and eventually forces non-dominant students to assimilate into mainstream norms (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

We discuss that the visual media of graphic design and comic strips could offer unique affordances to facilitate experiences and dialogues with audiences. Such unique affordances have long been discussed from the perspectives of information exchange and data processing (e.g., Angeli, Coventry, Johnson, & Renaud, 2005; Levie & Lentz, 1982). More recently, graphic-textual illustrations have also been discussed in relation to its power for displacing and disrupting colonizing knowledge-making practices, especially considering linguistically diverse learning environments (Kayumova, Zhang, & Scantlebury, 2018). This poster attempts to advance the discussion on the affordance of visuals as counter-storytelling. Specifically, we discuss the possibilities for visual counter-storytelling as a methodology to facilitate dialogues with teachers and pre-service teachers on teaching, learning and equity.

Methods

By using the unconventional forms of representations (graphic design and comic strips), we explore the possibilities of using these representations as a form of decolonial visual counter-storytelling. Our study was carried out in three phases. In Phase I, an ethnographic study was conducted in a school that belonged to a large public school board in Canada. The school had approximately 450 students representing more than 30 different language groups. Twenty-three percent of the students were born outside Canada and moved as an immigrant or a refugee. We collected the following data in order to capture a broader picture of classroom learning: (a) field notes from school visits, (b) video data from two classrooms (45 hours) over an academic year, (c) students' works and classroom artifacts, and (d) school newsletters and other institutional documents. In addition to the classroom data, we conducted interviews with the teacher three times.

In Phase II, we focused on one aspect of ethnographic findings to be illustrated in the form of a poster, as comic strips and a graphic image. In our visualization, we contrasted experiences of two bilingual students from different geopolitical backgrounds. One of the focal participants was a refugee student from Afghanistan. He was institutionally classified as an "English language learner." Another focal participant was a Canadian-born French-English bilingual student. We illustrated the stories of these two students, while graphically representing a key conceptual framework to account for the distinctive differences in these students' experiences of schooling.

In Phase III, we used the illustrated poster from Phase II in a teacher education course and facilitated the conversation about learning, equity and design. Pre-service teachers then illustrated their reactions to the poster and came up with potential classroom design to counter the dominant, deficit narratives around historically marginalized groups.

Findings and discussion

With our poster, we aim to evoke discussion on equity and learning in interconnected ways. One part of the poster will demonstrate two contrasting stories of two bilingual students with different geopolitical backgrounds. This part of the poster will depict these students' experiences in the context of school-based learning where the teacher aimed to foster students' agencies in mathematics learning by highlighting their everyday experiences to improve playground and recess space. While documenting some of the enhanced opportunities for students' learning, we also listened to quieter voices and documented their missed opportunities. In particular, our poster describes what it means to be labelled as an "English language learner" and how that act of labelling/being labelled serves as a context to shape students' learning opportunities (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; McDermott, 1993).

Another part of the poster will graphically represent our conceptualization of identity and learning, especially in terms of how geopolitical contexts surrounding students can afford and shape certain opportunities to learn. By focusing on two bilingual students who came from different geopolitical backgrounds (a refugee student from Afghanistan and a Canadian-born bilingual student), we demonstrate the intertwining of macro-level geopolitical contexts and micro-level experiences of learning. The last part of the poster will depict some of the drawings made by pre-service teachers, as they envisage future classrooms that address equity and teaching.

By engaging in visually mediated dialogues with audiences at the International Conference of Learning Sciences, we hope to demonstrate the value of visual counter-storytelling that utilizes graphic design and illustration. In particular, we are hoping to engage in discussion with audiences on how visually represented stories, based on ethnographic research, can provide space to surface dominant, deficit narratives and invoke equitable classroom designs.

We situate our study within the field of learning sciences where a growing number of scholars are adding critical perspectives on power and identities to design, teaching and learning (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Philip, 2011). By illustrating and problematizing geo-politically marginalized students' experiences in schooling, we bring forward the voices that are often not heard, through the medium of visual counter-storytelling. In our poster, we will demonstrate how visual counter-storytelling could lead to redesign and reimagination of experiences in schools, especially from the lens of those who have been historically marginalized.

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