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Student Stickers: Reflecting upon Joyful Learning, Co-Creation, and the Politics of Playful Dissemination

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Abstract

'Towards Joyful Learning' is a participatory research project that has explored the role of joy and enjoyment in higher education. Our students co-produced stickers which acted as a visual and material artefact to showcase much of this work. Our six stickers (inclusive of our central project logo) offer playful visualisations of substantive contributions from the student co-production project on calls and recommendations to move us towards a joyful pedagogy. In presenting our stickers, we wish to illustrate three key points. First, we want to demonstrate how the process of collaboratively considering findings and the analytical metaphors and imagery facilitated a student-led analysis and dissemination: positioning students as active co-producers of knowledge and understanding. Second, and building upon scholarly work on stickers as symbols of protest and

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activism, we wish to showcase the playful, joyful but serious work of stickers in visual storytelling and political calls to action through their circulation. Third and finally, we centre the role of the sticker as both a participatory process and a form of dissemination that works with, for and by our audience of student communities in their interests, priorities and preferences for communication. This article offers both substantive and methodological contributions by (1) adding to the developing sociology of stickers and (2) examining stickers as an aid to the co-production and dissemination of knowledge with, by and for, students within higher education.

Keywords

dissemination, joy, pedagogy, stickers, visual methods



Sociologically situating stickers

Stickers are often self-adhesive pieces of paper, vinyl or plastic that come in a diversity of shapes and sizes. Their sensory feel and adhesive can work and be experienced in a diversity of ways. Designs may be do-it-yourself (DIY) or carefully illustrated by creatives. Stickers are often cheap to print and easy to disseminate with a peel and a stick. Colours and content can vary, but what stickers have in common is that they are conveying something visual. Their material manifestation in everyday life can include children's creativity and play, a symbol of achievement right through to political statements on lampposts and toilet doors. Put simply, stickers are a *statement*. A statement that can be disruptive, playful or provocative, situated within time, place, and contexts in which people interact with the seemingly mundane proclamations or artwork attached to objects of our everyday lives. Stickers are another medium in which 'public sociology' can be practised, engaging multiple and diverse publics within and beyond the academy (Burawoy, 2005).

As Awcock (2021: 523) notes, 'Small and ephemeral, it is not hard to see why protest stickers have been overlooked by scholars'. Scholars, mainly within the fields of communication studies and semiotics, cultural studies, and geography, have highlighted the role of stickers within public space (Awcock, 2023, 2021; Bodden and Awcock, 2024; Awcock and Rosenberg, 2023; Coşmeleacă, 2022; Desai, 2019; Melo and Balonas, 2019) but to date, research on the sociological and methodological significance remains sparse. Parallels can be drawn from bumper stickers (Bloch, 2000a, 2000b; Case, 1992; Endersby and Towle, 1996), street art and graffiti (Awad and Wagoner, 2017), and adhesive street art (Walde, 2007). Stickers punctuate our clothes, material belongings, the streets, their furniture and the walls around us, acting as advertising, artistic resistance or even protest (Awad and Wagoner, 2017; Awcock, 2023, 2021; Vigsø, 2010). Stickers are also a *method* of engagement with children and young people (Mannay et al., 2019) or emblems of community inclusion (González, 2024). We must not downplay the practices, cultures and expertise of sticker creation, production and archive. This is much like many of the creative and arts-based community-based methods we celebrate and increasingly draw upon within sociology (Lomax and Smith, 2022; Ptolomey and Nelson, 2022). For us, our project stickers have occupied much of our university space, finding homes and political placements on staff and students' laptops, office walls, doors, and notebooks. We assert that these stickers are simultaneously statements for social change for moving towards an enjoyable higher education, and as a way of centring students as co-constructors of knowledge production and dissemination.

Towards joyful learning

The 'Joyful Learning' project arrived in response to an institutional call for education projects with a commitment to building engaged, inclusive, and joyful learning communities *with* students (see White et al., 2026). This follows a broader trend in both research and pedagogical practice that positions 'students as partners' in co-creating learning and teaching (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne, 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) through research-led education (Neary, 2013) and shared decision-making

(Bovill, 2020). Despite joy being a ubiquitous emotion (albeit not always afforded or accessed equally), it has received little attention within sociology. Shuster and Westbrook (2024) note this absence as a 'joy deficit' with a tendency of sociologists to shine a light on social problems. This absence of joy is further noted in educational literature (Griffiths, 2012) both as an academic area of inquiry and as a tangible absence of joyful experiences for learners and educators (Kern et al., 2014; Whitsed et al., 2024), particularly when it comes to joy and enjoyment later on in the educational journey (e.g. higher education and the education of adults as opposed to primary education). UK, US and EU educational policies are increasingly geared towards the value of education in terms of graduate outcomes (and future economic returns), rather than educational *experience* as an end in itself (Griffiths, 2012). We were interested in positioning joy as a driving force of inquiry and were committed, following the work of bell hooks, to 'look, live, find and create spaces of joy' (Hooks, 2003: 169). We also built upon the work of Berg and Seiger (2017) and Paulo Freire (2000), all of whom have created space for slower, more critical and emancipatory discussions of educational praxis. We want to make a case for educational encounters that *create the conditions for joy* and invite students to lean 'in' rather than 'away' from the possibility to connect and become. We agree with Dhungana's assertion (2023: 30) in that 'joyful teaching and learning in the university setting is both possible and necessary'. To achieve this, we must facilitate and respect our interdependence and celebrate wonderment and cultures of inquiry (Dhungana, 2023).

In order to sit seriously with joyful learning, we co-hosted two creative workshops during the summer of 2023 (Ethical approval no. 052793). Our student leads advertised the project workshops to undergraduate and postgraduate taught students via student union networks, university emails, posters and digital displays across campus. Tea, cakes and craft materials were provided. Twenty-one students participated, including our three lead student co-researchers. Students came from a diversity of disciplines: data science, psychology, education, arts and humanities. Students self-described themselves, with six self-identifying as having a physical impairment, mental health condition or as being neurodivergent. Several students shared within the session coming to university later in life or barriers to accessing university. The students were predominantly women. Approximately four students were international students. Some students self-described their social identities, but many students did not share demographic information beyond their roles at university. We recognise the potential 'limitations' of this study and encourage further research to capture a more diverse student voice to critically engage with joyful learning which includes thinking through a host of research methods. Bovill (2020) notes that staff-student partnership projects often have small groups that are often already engaged or advantaged in some way. Our student leads and co-authors were previously student union officers and thus represented particularly engaged student cohorts. Academic leads were not present in the workshops, as requested by the student lead researchers to challenge power imbalances and to enhance student voice. Student workshop contributions included a diversity of creative and art-based formats (White et al., 2026) which acted as prompts for our analysis and visual dissemination discussed below. However, for the purposes of this piece, we wish to highlight how stickers specifically assist us with

thematic analysis, creative and playful methods of co-construction, and finally, as a tool for pushing political statements for meaningful social change in education.

Stickers as a route to thematic analysis

Following the workshops, we held a collaborative analysis session with the academics and lead student researchers. This was to co-produce our critical reflections and collaboratively consider how to share thoughts, feelings, reflections, and early analysis (Bovill, 2020). We assembled thematic areas centred around community, connection, safe failure, diverse knowledge, care, and challenging conditions. Our theorisations of joy as both human and non-human (i.e. our connections to the world around us) meant that we kept returning to visual metaphors of nature and ecosystems of interconnection and thus our students began sketching central findings with this in mind. Our student lead researchers led the *formation* of the themes that aligned with the ecosystem metaphor and *illustrated* the initial designs themselves. Our student leads also considered '*who*' needed to listen or enact social change and '*how*' such findings should be disseminated or circulated: all as part of the thematic analysis and co-produced process. In thinking through graphic dissemination and capturing student audiences, it was here that stickers became a talking point. For them, stickers felt like effective imagery, an appropriate medium to engage a student audience and a meaningful tool for playful and yet politically charged messages for social change within higher education. Thinking of the analytical role of stickers and their formation here aligns with Rose's (2016) framework here in thinking through image, audience and circulation. Our images were co-produced by students, where our lead student co-researchers thought about the needs of students as our primary audience and how we also circulate and disseminate with this group in mind. As academic leads, we were initially resistant, in part due to the internalised conventions of academic dissemination, and we were fearful as to the potential 'trivialisation' and 'impact' of such. Awcock (2021) similarly raises how we often do not know whether stickers create social change and impact but how they act as a physical and material artefact for 'provocation' (Woodward, 2019). We resisted such fear of trivialisation, and in the spirit of co-production and centring student voice, employed student graphic designers (*Cherry Toosh*) to bring our findings to life, ensuring that students were centred and leading with knowledge production, analysis, and creative dissemination. The images and stickers presented in this article are a result of the co-production of our student participant contributions, our lead student co-researchers thematic analysis and the graphic design of Cherry Toosh. Together, we realised that stickers were a powerful tool: political, playful, and significantly, joyful. Stickers and their *analytical formation* were modes of storytelling with, by and for, student communities as co-researchers (Bovill, 2020; Pauw, 2023: 7). Further to the analytical potential, we also want to recognise stickers as joyful, playful and suitably disruptive with, by and for student communities as co-producers of knowledge.

Showcasing stickers as joyful, playful and suitably disruptive

Upon discussion of the role of joy in educational experiences, we found that little joy was to be found. Current learning and teaching conditions stifled joy through goal-driven

metrics and a continued focus on assessment and attainment. US and EU educational policies are increasingly focused on graduate outcomes and education as an end in itself rather than *student experience and process of learning* (Griffiths, 2012) and there has been a well established critique of such amplified neoliberal marketisation in HE (Tomlinson et al., 2020: 627). Our student sticker, ‘Learning is a process, not an outcome’ responded to our student co-researchers’ beliefs that our learning conditions should allow for, and for design for, safe failure within the educational experience (Mann, 2001; Noddings, 1992). This allows for students ‘wondering’ or feeling the ‘magic’ of learning and discovery (Dhungana, 2023; Montuori, 2008). Students desired conditions beyond assessment, measurement and ‘getting things right’ or ‘achievement’. This emphasis on process is fundamental to growth, learning, and inevitably, joy in the process (Peace and McVitty, 2025).

As Melo and Balonas, (2019: 174) note, stickers work as a case of ‘subvertising and of paradoxical activism, simultaneously enhancing love and hate messages’. In our case, our students’ statements, analyses, and suggestions for social change and action, were told through stickers. Our sticker entitled, ‘How are we meant to grow in these conditions?’ is perhaps the most overt and political engagement with the structural and societal barriers faced by students in higher education that prohibit joyful learning. In this image is a note to the marketisation of higher education and the price paid by those within it. Similarly, in line with an activist and love driven commitment to creating joyful learning conditions, our student stickers celebrated and sought to centre communal and inclusive messages. For example, one sticker entitled, ‘Community over Competition’ sought to communicate how students desire connection and want to learn together, share culture and collaborate. To find and feel joy, students and educators alike want to feel part of something much bigger and interconnected. Relational pedagogy puts relationships and connection at the heart of education (Bovill, 2020) and centres the integral work of ensuring students feel belonging within higher education (Gilani and Connor, 2024) for a common good and peer learning (Dhungana, 2023). Thus, each sticker demonstrated the playful, joyful but highlighted politicised and socialised need for better higher education. Such statements within each sticker, as previously noted in their very formation by students themselves, always sought to serve student communities as key recipients.

Showcasing stickers as serving student communities

Key to our project was how our staff–student partnership co-constructed understandings, implications and recommendations for good practice when it came to moving ourselves towards joyful learning. This aligns with critical pedagogies, decolonising curriculums and thinking beyond disciplines to enable connected and diverse communal learning. As a commitment to this, our sticker entitled, ‘Our Different Forms of Knowledge are Diverse, Messy and Legitimate’ engages with a commitment to cross disciplinarity and deconstructing knowledge hierarchies (Heron and Reason, 2008). Doing so allows for students to be active creators and choosers and not merely consumers of knowledge or education designed by another (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne, 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Neary, 2013). In their academic inquiry of stickers, Awcock (2021) highlights four priorities which stress that there is only so much that the

stickers themselves can reveal about the motivations of those who use them; the people who produce, distribute, and put up stickers need to be central to the conversations about them and to ‘stickering’ as a practice and an engagement. Namely, all those within higher education encountering the project and its findings need to consider the statements in practice. Our sticker that captures the message, ‘Learners need care, equity and time’ responds to a broader engagement with critical pedagogy (Hooks, 2003) that centres equity, diversity and inclusion in caring for the human condition in our learning environments. For our students, this meant that support needed to be embedded, consistent and sustainable and not merely a reaction to crises. In the context of time, students advocated for slower paces and dormancy to allow for the diverse ways which people learn in their own time, in their own ways and on their own terms. Our stickers’ social and political statements sought to advocate for such conditions, slowly working towards serving the bigger requirements of student communities.

From our student-led analysis and the attunement towards the serious sociological work of stickers, we assert that their creation and circulation evidences how social research can showcase and serve student communities. Stickers facilitate participatory approaches and the uptake and display of stickers as co-creative outputs engage and thus become a form of sub-activism (Melo & Balonas, 2019): a subtle but significant step to showcasing messages of social change. Anecdotally we know that these stickers now live on the laptops of staff and students alike. In Rose’s (2016) framework for visual analysis, she notes the importance of *where an image* (or in our case, where a sticker) *circulates* (and its ability to do so across social contexts and times) as also relevant. In our case, our stickers are no longer stationary or ‘stuck’ but *move with* students and staff as they take up space within the university. And while we cannot claim their prominence as impact or evidence for change in joyful learning, what we can be sure of is that our select number of students’ contributions, statements for social change and the stickers that followed have certainly left a stamp of the desire for social change within higher education.

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Shona Tulloch acted as a Lead Student Researcher for the joyful learning project. They were part of the elected Students' Union Officer team, first as the Liberation Officer and then as the Disabled Students' Officer, advocating for equitable, inclusive, decolonised and ambitious practises within higher education.

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