

## Intelligent Leaders, Intelligent Spaces

Regina Everitt

As an undergraduate, I had an internship at an agency writing recruitment advertisements. The ads ranged from the small want ads for salespeople or programmers to the full-page spreads in newspapers and magazines for directors and executives. I was no Don Draper from *Madmen*. I didn't particularly enjoy the job, but it taught me to know my audience. And I learned that I enjoyed pitching ads for some audiences more than others.

Now, I am the Director of Library, Archives and Learning Services at the University of East London (UEL). The university is located in the Borough of Newham, one of the poorest in London with an ethnically diverse population that was one of the most adversely impacted by COVID19. The University has a 70% Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) student population and a staff population of almost 70% White. So, many students do not see themselves in the staff population. Most of the students are the first in their families to attend university. According to UEL internal data, the degree awarding gap (percentage difference between groups receiving a 1<sup>st</sup>/2:1 or A/B grade) between BAME and White students was about 13% in 2019/20, down from 21% the previous year. However, the gap between Black and White students was just over 17%, down from roughly 25% the previous year.

The university has undertaken a range of measures to close the degree awarding gap. It has created an Office of Institutional Equity (OIE), the first of its kind in the United Kingdom, to lead on delivery of an ambitious action plan to achieve the Race Equality Charter (REC). The REC is a framework created by AdvanceHE to aid institutions in identifying and challenging the barriers that block the progression of BAME students and staff (AdvanceHE, 2020). The UEL action plan includes staff training on inclusive teaching practices and anti-racism as well as reviews of such institutional policies and procedures as recruitment, performance management, and disciplinarys. The OIE also monitors the equality, diversity, and inclusion data for trends, sector benchmarking, and achievement of targets.

Key to the success of narrowing the degree awarding gap is staff knowing their audience. We must see the whole student – their lived experiences, academic needs, caring responsibilities, work demands – so that we can provide the right level of support to lead to successful outcomes for the students. However, to truly support our students, we must be able to empathise with the challenges that they may face and be aware of and manage our own attitudes towards them. This is called *emotional intelligence*. As a leader, I must support my team in becoming emotionally intelligent and draw on their individual strengths to enable them to effectively support the students; thus, using my *social intelligence*. So, I must be an emotionally and socially intelligent leader to create the culture that enables my team to deliver spaces and services that give our students a sense of belonging and enable them to be academically successful. Ideally, the students will see themselves reflected within the spaces and services that I lead.

### Emotional and Social Intelligence

Psychologist Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence as being aware of and managing one's emotions and empathising with others (Big Think, 2012). As a leader, I must be aware of my own strengths, weaknesses and biases and be able to recognise these within my team and organisation. So, if I lack empathy for young parents 'who shouldn't have gotten themselves in that position,' I am unlikely to implement support services that accommodate their caring responsibilities. If I am

uneasy around young Black men, my interactions with them may be strained leading to conflict and disciplinary action.

Social intelligence would be my awareness of the feelings of others, reading the signals that they send through their behaviours and interacting accordingly (Goleman, 2007, 84). For example, I may implement interventions to encourage international and home UK students to work collaboratively in a learning space. Or, I may facilitate targeted training for staff members who continually have conflict with certain students. Goleman talks about emotions as being how we are wired. So, I would say that social intelligence is our internal 'bluetooth' allowing individuals to connect and communicate through words and actions. As a leader, I will want to ensure that those connections are constructive.

I help my team to know our audience by understanding how well our students engage with our collections, spaces, imagery and messaging through analysis of usage data, feedback, user experience activities, and other qualitative and quantitative methods. I also allocate funding to empower staff to use creative and inclusive resources and practices to support students and develop their skills. Finally, discussions about social and emotional intelligence are embedded in customer care training.

The best way for leaders to know whether they are emotionally or socially intelligent is to ask those around us, usually through a 360-degree appraisal. A 360-degree appraisal is when peers, stakeholders, customers, line managers, and junior and senior staff provide anonymous feedback on a range of behaviours and competencies of a leader. My last appraisal, using the Blended360 tool, showed that I rated in the upper quartile for both emotional and social intelligence with a slightly higher rating for the former. I won't be self-congratulatory just yet, however. As I have a particular interest in space, I will reflect on how my emotional and social intelligence have influenced how I have developed and used spaces.

### Who Belongs in What Space?

It was a scorching day in Washington, DC in July 2019. My friends and I had found a cool, shady patch in Lafayette Square opposite the White House and were just getting stuck into the latest gossip when we were suddenly surrounded by police officers on cycles yelling, 'Get out of the park NOW!' My friends said that this was normal practice when the President was near. (A year later, that same park would be forcibly cleared by security forces during Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests about the death of George Floyd so that then President Trump could have a photo opportunity nearby as described in an article by Baker et al in the New York Times on 2 June 2020.)

We eventually ended up at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, a free place to beat the heat whilst visiting the portraits of former President Barack Obama and former first Lady Michelle Obama. Their portraits were stunningly beautiful and regal within a space filled with predominantly White American historical figures.

However, the portrait that sparked the most animated conversation amongst me and my friends was that of rapper LL Cool J. It had been many years since I visited the gallery, so it was surreal to see a rapper from my inner-city childhood in the National Portrait Gallery in the same room as Michelle Obama and Toni Morrison. The LL Cool J portrait had been part of a wider exhibition at the Gallery of portraits of hip-hop icons, according to a Gallery blog (National Portrait Gallery, 2021). A far cry from my childhood memory of a more staid visit to the space!

Artist Kehinde Wiley (who painted Barack Obama's portrait) captured LL Cool J in the same pose of businessman and philanthropist John D Rockefeller in a portrait by John Singer Sargent some 100 years ago. Wiley is known for creating portraits of African American men and women in the poses of aristocrats in works by Western and European painters (George, 2020). The portrait was commissioned by the VH1 Hip-Hop honours for which LL Cool J received recognition. LL Cool J is said to have an interest in art and sits on the Smithsonian National Board (Ibid 2020).

LL Cool J's portrait stood out for me that day because I grew up listening to his music and rap was the music of the streets -- a world away from the Smithsonian. Faced with his portrait, I reverted to that inner-city girl from the segregated neighbourhood who grew up to believe that Black people didn't belong in hallowed spaces like art galleries, but only worked there as cleaners or security guards. For that moment, I, who have worked on three continents, had to check my feelings of belonging within what I considered to be 'white only' spaces. Like the takeover of the Louvre in 2018 by Beyonce and Jay Z, I needed to reclaim my right to be in that or any space and reaffirmed my vow to help my students to do the same (Chrisafis, 2019).

### My Experiences of Spaces

I was born in Philadelphia, the city where the Declaration of Independence, decolonising the United States from Great Britain, and the Constitution were signed. Located in the northeast of the U.S., the city is an hour and half journey on the high-speed train south of New York City. The Philadelphia of my childhood memory had distinct spaces where everyone knew where they belonged; you ventured into other neighbourhoods and spaces with caution. West Philly, where I was born and grew up, was a predominantly African American community where 'blue collar' workers had their homes. There was also an aspirational middle class with some teachers, police officers, nurses, and social workers. At the turn of the 20th century, renowned baritone, actor, and activist Paul Robeson lived just a few blocks from my West Philly home. Many years later, I would occupy another space in Paul Robeson's steps, SOAS University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies). Robeson studied and campaigned for social justice at SOAS and I later ran the library there.

On reflection, the Philly neighbourhoods, spaces of my childhood, which were predominantly working class, were segregated by ethnicity. North Philly had predominantly African American and Latinx communities. South Philly had a large Italian community. In the Southwest and East were Polish and Irish communities. In the Northeast were Jewish communities. I remember being chased from the Elmwood section of Southwest Philly by the local White kids whenever we went to the skating rink there. Centre city was the more affluent and historical area of Philadelphia and home of the Declaration of Independence. West and North Philly were hit hard during the gang war era of the 70s and the crack era of the 80s and 90s and were considered 'no go' areas unless you knew where you were going. It was virtually impossible to get a taxicab to go to West or North Philly at night.

Through my primary and secondary school years, I circulated largely within the confines of my West Philly space. The people in the spaces were just like me. Black. Working class. Family roots in the Southern US states like Virginia and the Carolinas, but unclear about the specific location of descendance from Africa. My schools and churches were all within walking distance or a short bus ride or drive away. The local barber and candy shop were all black-owned. There was a local cinema where we enjoyed scary movies and cop films like Shaft and Dirty Harry. The barber, candy shop and cinema all disappeared by the end of my middle school years, but my local library, the Free Library of Philadelphia, still stands today.

As a teen in West Philly, I escaped my porch during the summer holidays to go to the library to languish among the stacks of the 'Black Literature' section. I devoured stories from writers from the Harlem Renaissance through the Black Power movement. Langston Hughes. Richard Wright. James Baldwin. Lorraine Hansberry. Angela Davis. It was *The Big Sea* by Langston Hughes that dared me to dream of escaping the gang and drug problems of my inner-city space to travel the world. In the book, Hughes recounts the adventures of his travels as a merchant seaman to Africa and hanging out in the nightclubs of Europe. I wanted that freedom! I was outgrowing my West Philly space.

I was fortunate that the state of Pennsylvania has some outstanding higher education institutions as I could not afford the cost of studying out of state. In America, residents receive significant discounts if they study in their home state. For my undergraduate studies, I attended Temple University, which is located in North Philly with its notable issues with drug-related violence. Temple University has since expanded and regentrified some of its North Philly surroundings as have University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University – my postgraduate alma mater—in West Philly. It is not unusual now to see a White person walking blocks from where I grew up whereas in my youth, the only White people in the area were cops and insurance salesmen.

Although Temple University was located in a predominantly Black neighbourhood, its student population was predominantly White. So, all the familiarity, comfort, and belonging of being in a neighbourhood of people who were just like me, were stripped away the minute I walked into the hallowed walls of the university. The posters showed pictures of the White people that I only saw on television, blonde-haired, blue-eyed – 'all American' boys and girls. The students in my class were predominantly White. I recall only one or two non-White lecturers. I remember in my first year a guy that I attended high school with said that he planned to leave as he never expected there to be so many White people at the university. I don't think that he had anything against White people per se. He, like me, was thrust into a space that was worlds different from where we were from. The only White adults that we had ever spoken to at length were our schoolteachers. The White kids used to chase us from the skating rink. Keg parties? Toga parties? Nah, we partied differently in West Philly. My friend did transfer to one of the historically black universities in the south. I had to make this work mostly because family finances didn't allow out of state options. So, I took a deep breath and dove in.

In her book, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Beverly Daniel Tatum notes that Black students in predominantly white educational environments think of themselves in terms of race because that is how the rest of the world sees them (Tatum, 1997, 214). In my all Black high school, my school friend and I were the athlete, the cheerleader, the newspaper editor, the head of the honour society. At the predominantly white university, we were the only Black young woman or man on the course. And black was identifiable by all the nefarious activities that took place outside the university walls: crime, poverty, other. Though Tatum's book was about students in secondary education, I recognised the coping mechanisms of the Black students in these predominantly white spaces (e.g., downplay academic ability to avoid being accused of 'acting white' or amplify use of slang to be 'more black'.)

I stayed at the university and was glad that I did in the end. I graduated with honours and found a multicultural group of lifelong friends. Expectedly, I endured some of the same challenges Black and Brown students face today: lecturers not calling on me or not valuing my work; being the 'only fly in the sugar bowl' at parties and events; having few Black or Brown role models; and being on the receiving end of back-handed, 'helpful' advice: 'You should get rid of that West Philly accent.' However, during my years at Temple, I proved to myself that I could perform academically just as well if not better than my White peers, many of whom attended high schools with more resources

than mine. My experience also gave me valuable lessons on how to navigate in the work environment and postgraduate education, where I would be in the minority again. By the time I completed graduate school, I had started to travel and had developed confidence in inhabiting new spaces, spaces that in childhood did not appear to be for people like me.

When Maria Balshaw, Director of Tate, was Director of the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, she led a major renovation of the space, removing the enclosing walls and enabling art to be seen from the outside. During an interview on Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, she describes a scene where a child on a scooter rides up to the entrance of the refurbished gallery and as the doors opened proceeded to scoot inside, to the abject horror of his father, who had been chasing behind him (BBC, 2020). Balshaw said that as a gallery staff member welcomed them into the space, she knew that they had done the right thing by making the space more accessible to the local community. I love that story for I couldn't imagine my early West Philly self walking into a Centre City art gallery and being welcomed. Yet, had I tried I may have been pleasantly surprised.

I draw on these formative experiences of my emotional and social intelligence about space and belonging as I lead the development of spaces and services to support student learning. As Matthew Syed discussed in *Rebel Ideas*, having a member of a team that has a perspective that is different from the status quo could lead to creative solutions to solve complex problems (Syed, 2020). With the early spaces that I developed and managed, I would like to think that I brought a unique perspective to the homogenous senior management teams with which I worked in higher education.

#### My Influence and Leadership of Spaces

In 1961, American President John F Kennedy signed a declaration to create the Peace Corps, a volunteer agency created to support 'developing' nations and to promote world peace. This was a great opportunity for me to travel, live and work in Africa, so I signed up. I was assigned to teach English as a Second Language (TESL) in universities and schools in Central and West Africa. The subtext of the teacher training materials were unobvious messages about how great life was in America. I planned to inject some reality into my teaching and prior to departure, arranged for book donations about African American history to be sent to my schools and the library I ran. The students were, of course, interested in life in America and how to gain scholarships or sponsorship for study. However, because I was their teacher, they were very interested in contemporary African American life – where we lived, how we dressed, what music we enjoyed, how we spent our leisure time, our slang. I filled my classrooms with images and sounds from African American life as we discussed the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights movement, and contemporary politics. The students were also interested in the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. When I called myself a 'Pan Africanist' as I was unsure where on the continent my family originated, they claimed me as their kin. I was most often identified as Malinke, one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa.

As an English language teacher, I wanted my students to vocalise the language. This sounds obvious but it was not the approach of my francophone African colleagues who taught French. In their classrooms, students sat quietly conjugating verbs using different colour pens to highlight phrases in neat little notebooks presumably replicating well-mannered French children. Their approach to teaching exemplified what Freire called a 'banking' method in which the students were expected to regurgitate whatever the teacher deposited in their heads (Freire, 2018). In my classes, we read aloud, sang, did impromptu plays, wrote and performed raps! The Head of Studies was not amused by my noisy lessons, so I kept my classroom door shut to create a safe space for students to express themselves using the English language. The students were engaged and co-created lessons.

Years later at the University of the Arts London, I had the opportunity to develop a social learning space called the Learning Zone where students were empowered to decide how and where they would study, work collaboratively, reconfigure the space as they wanted, use new technology, and eat, drink and use their mobile devices. It was the antithesis of the 'ssh' library environments that I experienced during my undergrad and postgrad studies and worked particularly well for the practical work of art and design students (e.g., sewing, film rendering, sketching). The informal nature of the space fostered students' sense of ownership and belonging in the space. There were few rules about what students couldn't do and student peer workers to help them to discover what was possible in the space. I tried to limit interventions, allowing students to lead on how the space was used. However, I think we and academic colleagues could have done more to encourage more interactions between home and international students thus giving all students more of an international experience. For example, Chinese students often sat together, maybe due to language barriers. Like the 'Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria,' they self-segregated for whatever reason, possibly to remain within their comfort level with people like themselves. Ideally, their lecturers would have divided students into multicultural teams for collaborative work and they would have used spaces like the Learning Zone to co-create.

From the tabula rasa freedom of running the Learning Zone at UAL, I moved on to SOAS University of London, a world-renowned specialist in the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Whereas the SOAS of the past trained civil servants on languages and cultures so that they could manage British colonies, the SOAS of today seeks to lead the fight on anti-racism and social justice. The SOAS team's work on decolonisation is discussed in more detail in another chapter in this book. However, access to and use of the spaces in the library changed over the years. Due to its unique collections, the SOAS Library is one of the most popular destinations for reciprocal access schemes with UK and international institutions. Protective of the collections, some front-line staff members during my time there acted as *gatekeepers* as they interrogated users on why they needed to enter the library. I sought to shift that approach to *enabling* users to access the library as members of the public were welcome to access the collections for reference purposes. I was aware that some long-serving library and academic staff longed for the days when the Reading Room, which later became a computer lab, was a quiet space where international researchers interrogated the collections in their original language under the protective gaze of a library assistant. However, the renovated collaborative study spaces and zoned quiet and silent spaces created a more open and welcoming environment for students and staff.

University of East London has two modern libraries: one at the Docklands Campus and one at the Stratford Campus. Both libraries provide zoned spaces for collaborative, quiet, and silent study. Both buildings are normally open 24/7 during teaching weeks with access to PCs, Wi-Fi, and self-service machines to enable students to borrow and return items and manage their accounts on demand. Beyond the physical buildings, students have 24/7 access to a range of online resources such as ebooks, ejournals, databases, and self-paced learning materials with chat support to aide students in navigating the resources.

Like many students, some UEL students have caring and other responsibilities beyond their studies. To support this diverse population of students, the library team implemented a range of targeted services to embed a sense of belonging in the physical and virtual spaces. Baby changing tables, games and books are available in the libraries for those students who may need to bring children with them to the libraries. Students are encouraged to recommend texts for the collection. Library teams have been working with academic staff and students to embed more inclusive teaching practices with the addition of texts with a range of intellectual thought that speak to the lives of the

students. Library staff engage in reading groups where students and academics come together to read and discuss critical race theory. Library staff and students share suggestions for interesting, extracurricular reads via a Teams site with recommendations ranging from Charles Bukowsky to Bernadine Evaristo. The library team members enjoy consulting with students through such user experience tools as graffiti boards or journey mapping and adapting services and spaces to meet student needs. I support these interests through the allocation of funding for resources or time for staff members to attend events or visit other institutions to share ideas. I also enable them to share their experiences through regular slots at team meetings and host events, where possible. All these actions foster a 'can do' culture that unleashes staff creativity to deliver spaces and services that meet our students' needs.

### Designing in Intelligence

In her research entitled *Who is worthy of these walls? Postgraduate students, UK universities, and institutional racism*, Akile Ahmet captures the experiences of BAME postgraduate students in London-based Russell Group institutions through focus groups, in-depth interviews and the use of photography in which participants visualise their experiences. The participants cited a range of experiences that resonated with my time at university decades earlier, such as ill-tempered responses from lecturers when they are engaged in debate (Ahmet, 2020). The feeling of being 'othered' by the imagery of predominantly White leaders and historical figures from the past looming from institution walls was resonant with my childhood memories of visiting spaces like the Smithsonian National Art Gallery.

As a result of the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests following the killing of George Floyd in America by police, university leaders have been challenged to become emotionally intelligent about the impacts of imagery of statues and portraits within their institutions. At University of East London, the statue of the Sir John Cass, who built his wealth from the slave trade, was removed from the School of Education and Communities amid concerns from students and staff about its negative and painful connotations (UEL, 2020). The School was renamed, dropping Cass from its title. City University of London took a similar approach, removing the name from its Business School (Neate, 2020). Ironically, the Sir John Cass foundation was set up in 1748 to promote education of young people in London, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, according to the Foundation website.

In solidarity with the Rhodes Must Fall campaign started at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 2015, students and staff have demanded the removal of the statue of Cecil B. Rhodes from Oriel College at Oxford University. Rhodes, a businessman during the colonial era in South Africa, is a symbol of imperialism and racism which is at odds with modern educational values. At the time of this writing, a commission was set up at Oxford University to determine the future of the statue (Coughlan, 2020).

I think that it is right that educational institutions, particularly, review their spaces and messaging to ensure that they do not alienate the very populations they are meant to educate. As an information professional, I do not advocate that history is hidden or re-written but it should be contextualised to show societal evolution. As leaders, we must be emotionally and socially intelligent enough to continually challenge (or be challenged on) our assumptions and approaches to delivery of spaces and services.

In the *Elemental Workplace*, Neil User identifies 12 key elements to create 'fantastic' workplaces for users (User, 2018, 72-144). Amongst these are:

- **Influence** - Where a user can create a relationship with the space and reconfigure it to suit them.
- **Inclusion** - Where the space accommodates the user's needs without need for obvious adjustment.

As discussed above, the ethos around the development of the Learning Zone was to allow users a choice in how they configured the space facilitated by lightweight furniture on castors. The space had high and low tech to accommodate practices ranging from knitting to film rendering. The student workers were from a variety of countries so spoke different languages thus mitigating the language barrier to seeking assistance. The imagery used in promotional literature and presentations showed the diversity of the user population.

The light, open and zoned informal to formal design are common features in modern academic libraries. Two examples of great practice in my view are Birmingham University Library, opened in 2016, and University of Roehampton Library, opened in 2017. Both award-winning buildings feature a variety of learning spaces providing students with the choice of where and how to study. They both have beautiful outlooks to green spaces that provide a calming respite from intense periods of study. These spaces are a far cry from the university libraries of my past where the movement of a chair, crackle of a crisp packet, or utterance of a single word would bring the ire of some students and staff. In these modern spaces, you don't feel that you need to make yourself unseen and unheard.

Mitigation of the spread of the coronavirus (COVID19) has influenced space accessibility and design considerations. During periods of restriction of public movement (lockdown), academic library buildings were forced to close and teaching moved online, thus disproportionately disadvantaging students living in 'digital poverty' -- with no access to IT equipment or Wi-Fi. As restrictions were eased, library spaces were among the first university buildings to open, particularly to make accessible PCs, Wi-Fi, and study spaces for students without access at their home residences. In compliance with government guidance, the spaces must enable students to have 1-2 metres of distance between them (physical distance); be well-ventilated to blow away any virus particles; have surfaces that are easily disinfected; and have thoroughfares that can support one-way systems (DOHE, 2021). Modern library spaces like those at University of East London, and presumably Birmingham and Roehampton universities, have generally adapted well to the compliance requirements, thus reinforcing the inclusion element of their design.

### In Conclusion

London is one of my favourite cities for the arts, shopping, and foodie experiences. When I had my son many years ago, I was determined to continue to enjoy the city's many pleasures. So, I popped him in the pram and set off for the tube. I soon realised how inconveniently few step-free options there were at stations around London and quickly learned which ones to avoid. That experience reinforced my empathy with people who need step-free access to spaces and continues to influence my thinking about the functional aspects of the spaces that I lead.

Not all leaders can walk in the shoes of their service users. A White female library director, for example, cannot truly understand what it feels like to be a Black male undergraduate student. However, she can talk to the student, work with academic teams to create support systems (e.g., resources, spaces, information skills sessions), and learn about effective approaches for supporting the students. Once she and her team have gotten to truly know their audience, they can reflect on

their own attitudes about the students' experiences then work together to implement relevant support.

Having grown up in a similar environment to many of my students at UEL, I have the privilege of understanding many of their lived experiences. However, I am decades their senior with formative experiences that influence how I see the world, how those perceptions manifest in my leadership style, and the resultant impact on the work culture in which my team delivers spaces and services. So, if the presence of an inner-city rap icon in a national art gallery gives me pause, then the 'why' really matters.

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