PhotoVoice: An Innovative Qualitative Method in Research and Classroom Teaching

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Abstract: *The purpose of this workshop was to inform participants of the multiple uses of a qualitative research method called Photovoice. Both presenters have utilized this method extensively in their own academic research, in their research methods courses, and in their non-research related courses. In this method, participants are provided with a series of questions (or topics) and asked to take photographs that capture their responses to these questions/topics. Once these photographs have been taken, participants meet with researchers/instructors to discuss the photographs in a semi-structured or focus group format. Photovoice allows participants to take an active role in research and allows their perspectives to be visually displayed for enhanced discussion.*

Key Words: PhotoVoice; Qualitative; Participatory; Learning; Teaching

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this symposium session is to inform participants of the multiple uses of a qualitative research method called Photovoice. We have utilized this method extensively in our academic research, in research methods courses, and in non-research related courses. Photovoice was developed by Wang and Burris in 1997.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Photovoice, a form of participatory action research, has been used by researchers to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of people from underrepresented and underserved populations. Beyond capturing these experiences, Photovoice seeks to empower participants and help facilitate positive social change. The method has been used in Appalachia as a way to increase rural residents' participation in community health assessments (Downey, Ireson, & Schutchfield, 2009); as a means of empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities (Povee, Bishop, & Roberts, 2014); and as a tool to gain a more thorough understanding of the experiences of adults residing in assisted living facilities in order to improve their home environment (Lewison, 2015). Over the past decade, the use of Photovoice as a pedagogical tool has become more common in K-12, undergraduate, and graduate classrooms. The approach has been utilized to support

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undergraduate students' learning in chemistry class (Stroud, 2014); to develop the critical thinking skills of graduate students enrolled in an advanced methodology course (Schell et al., 2009); and in the middle school environment to examine students' views of healthy living and physical activity (Treadwell & Taylor, 2017).

APPLYING THE METHOD

In addition to a brief overview of the applications above, we offer four specific uses of Photovoice in academic research and undergraduate classrooms. This includes an emphasis on the ability to highlight and represent the lived experiences of participants through this method of data collection.

USES IN RESEARCH

It is important to remember this is a qualitative form of research involving photos and, for these examples, structured interviews to gain information from participants. The importance of clarifying expectations for photo content was reinforced. Further discussion involved issues experienced with participants deviating from the expectations and including photos of people, particularly children, in their submissions. Limiting the length of the interview process (including the structure of the interview items) is also highly recommended.

EXAMPLE 1: STUDENT RESEARCH

The first example provided involved an undergraduate student researching emotional recognition and representation in early childhood. The student was working in an early childhood development center with the goal of becoming a certified early education instructor. Her study titled "Through the Eyes of Children: How might an art project create therapeutic space for healthy childhood development?" (Taylor, 2017) involved four 3 and 4 year old children. She met with each child individually to discuss their day and have them indicate how they were feeling on a feelings chart. Each child then was instructed to take photos that represented how they felt and then returned for a structured interview. The interview included the following items: What does this mean to you? Why did you take this photo? and How does it make you feel? The student then coded the data and found the following themes:

1. *Side tracked* which indicated the child was not paying attention to the process
2. *Humor* which indicated the child was laughing or making a joke of the process
3. *Storytelling/Imagination* which indicated the child was relating back to a story or creating a new story from the photo content
4. *Emotions/Feelings* which indicated the child had an inward focus
5. *Pride/Accomplishment* which indicated the child wished to share something particular

Three photos were selected from the student's work to demonstrate these themes.

Child's comment: "Sneetches on the beaches."
Theme represented: *Storytelling/Imagination*

Child's comment: "Warm, fluffy clouds would wrap me up like a soft blanket."
Theme represented: *Emotions/Feelings*

Child's comment: "This is the best stick. I want to show it to my mom and dad!"
Theme represented: *Pride/Accomplishment*

EXAMPLE 2: PUBLISHED RESEARCH

The second example provided information related to a research project we completed which has recently been published. This project, titled "The Lived Experiences of Mothers of Children with a Disability" (Munsell & O'Malley, 2019), involved four moms taking photos that represented life with their children. In recruitment and initial meetings we emphasized that photos not include their children, but many photos of the children were included and although they were discussed in interview, were not used in the published report. Instructions included taking photos and a structured interview using the SHOWeD method (Shaffer, 1983). This method directs users to ask the following questions: 1) What do you see here? 2) What is really happening here? 3) How does this relate to our understanding? 4) Why does this problem or strength exist? 5) How

could we education the community or policy makers? and 5) What can we do about it? We strongly suggest the use of transcription software if available, particularly for lengthy interviews. After coding the data, three themes emerged including *individuation*, *sensitivity* and *advocacy*. The following photos were selected as representing the themes.

Comment: "Every year has more meaning than for my other kids"
Theme represented: *Sensitivity*

Comment: "You can't just go buy a bike."
Theme represented: *Sensitivity*

Comment: "Today's a new day!"
Theme represented: *Advocacy*

EXAMPLE 3: NON-RESEARCH BASED CLASS

Creative assignments are a standard in the first author's Adolescent Development class. They range from development of a newsletter, painting, poetry and a photo assignment. The learning outcome for many of these assignments is "Demonstrate critical and creative thinking in relation to course concepts." In the photo assignment students are asked to select three of five topics provided. Their submissions are to include at least three photos and brief statements as to what concept each photo represents and why. You need to be very specific about photo content; no photos of people or words were accepted for this project. Many students asked if using photos

from the internet were appropriate, my answer was "no" followed by a lecture on photos not necessarily being open source just because they are on the internet. The following photos were selected as representative of student work:

Statement: "Who shall I be today?"
Concept: Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development; *Identity versus Identity Confusion*

Statement: "Stubborn like a rock!"
Concept: *Personality Development*

Statement: "Spreading my wings without losing my roots."
Concept: *Individuation*

EXAMPLE 4: NON-RESEARCH BASED CLASS

In the fall of 2019 the second author began teaching a new special topics psychology course entitled "Learning and Movement". The course serves as an introduction to various movement and

dance activities that can be used to facilitate integration of the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical aspects of the individual. The class consists of research and movement components. Students read assigned articles and then are guided through the movement activities discussed in these articles. After movement activities are completed, the students reflect on their experiences. Sometimes this reflection comes in the form of a class discussion or journal entry. Students have also reflected on their experiences using the Photovoice method, with the following assignment instructions: "Photovoice provides a way for us to represent our feelings and thoughts through photographs. This weekend take two photographs that abstractly represent two concepts we have been talking about experiencing in our Learning and Movement class: grounding and mindfulness. Provide a short explanation alongside each photograph that explains why you chose the photo." Learning outcome: "Demonstrate understanding of course concepts in a creative work."

Grounding: "The picture of the rock bench symbolizes grounding to me because of its simplicity and rawness. Made by man but unchanged from its natural form; only arranged differently. It's peaceful and natural."

Mindfulness: I once read that when you have to stop at a stoplight allow it to be a reminder to be in the present. There are many irritations in life we can turn into a joyful experience if we can be mindful."

Mindfulness: "…much of the time, especially in college, it's easy to get caught up in what's due next or feeling like you'll amount to nothing. The butterfly reminds me progress is happening, and making me realize or be mindful that I too am a caterpillar, so I should take a breath, be intentional with my actions and focus."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A few suggestions were made for doing your own Photovoice research or classroom project. Below are the highlights:

Research

- Be specific about photo content
- Expect interviews to run long
- Associate photos with interview quotes when possible
- Consider diversity

Classroom

- Align to student learning outcomes
- Explain and re-explain the assignment
- Discuss "creative" and "critical" thinking
- Use a rubric to grade assignments

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