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Photovoice in an Online Psychology of Gender Course: Facilitating Difficult Discussions and Increasing Student Engagement

Batsheva R. Guy
University of Cincinnati, serotabr@ucmail.uc.edu

Nancy Rogers
rogersne@ucmail.uc.edu

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Photovoice in an Online Psychology of Gender Course:
Facilitating Difficult Discussions and Increasing Student Engagement

Introduction & Rationale

Photovoice is a participatory action research evaluation tool rooted in feminist theory that facilitates expression of ideas and empowers participants (Jurkowski, 2008). The Photovoice method involves research participants taking their own photographs in response to a prompt, or multiple prompts, then sharing their photos and engaging in “critical dialogue” (Griebing et al., 2013, p. 23) about their photos whilst identifying themes (Goodhart et al., 2006).

Researchers have found Photovoice to be successful in documenting the experience of college students (Paiewonsky et al., 2010; Goodhart et al., 2006) as well as promote student learning (Cook, 2014), but there is a lack of literature surrounding the use of Photovoice in the classroom. We aim to fill this gap through applying Photovoice in an online, undergraduate Psychology course and measuring the outcomes via rubrics and student evaluations.

While Photovoice has been frequently used in needs assessment, it is still rarely used in evaluation, particularly in higher education, despite the evidence to support its evaluative properties (Kramer et al., 2013). Photovoice has been used to successfully evaluate public housing projects, medical interventions, land management, and home visitation programs (Guerra et al., 2013; Kong et al., 2013; Kramer et al.; Stevens, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2009). However, the use of Photovoice in evaluation has been typically used in the public health sector, as opposed to other contexts (Garner, 2014).

The current paper expands the use of Photovoice as an evaluation tool in the context of a higher education setting, in order to evaluate students’ critical thinking and engagement within undergraduate education. Photovoice has been used within academic settings in order to facilitate student engagement and learning (Massengale et al., 2016; Garner, 2014). Nevertheless, the use of Photovoice is limited in evaluating student learning outcomes within higher education. Photovoice also allows evaluators to view programs through the eyes of those involved, which is in contrast to common evaluation methodologies, as they “are focused on specific predetermined outcomes...This limits access to participants’ experiences beyond those considered relevant by the researchers” (Guerra et al., 2013).

Furthermore, online course discussions are superficial, involving students just going through the motions, so to speak, in order to get their word count in and finish the assignment—there is very little student engagement. Additionally, abstract theoretical concepts like social construction, environmental influence, and gender can be challenging for students to fully grasp (Dunn et al., 2013). Photovoice has been shown to be successful in “connecting” college students to scientific concepts (Cook, 2014, p. 28). Photovoice methodology provides a unique opportunity for increasing student engagement in addition to fostering critical thinking skills. The current article details our modified Photovoice process in the online classroom. We will explain how the use of Photovoice demonstrated changes in thinking, engagement, and critical thinking in an online Psychology of Gender course. This particular course was chosen due to the complex topics covered as well as it being online and asynchronous.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this project are twofold:

- (a) to increase student engagement in online discussion boards, and
- (b) enhance critical thinking while discussing controversial, gender-related topics.

Explanation

The basic steps of the Photovoice process involve:

1. Developing a prompt or prompts
2. Taking photographs
3. Discussing the photographs.

We modified the traditional Photovoice process in order to better fit the needs of a remote, asynchronous, classroom setting. For example, instead of collaboratively developing prompts with the students, we chose the prompts ahead of time in order to allow the prompts we choose to fit the assignments. For this Photovoice project, we developed the prompts based on the scope of the assignment and the learning outcomes of the particular course. The prompts are then shared with the students, who are instructed to take a photograph in response to the prompt. Once students take their photographs, they post their photographs to our university's Learning Management System (LMS), and discussion is facilitated on the LMS. Discussion is facilitated by the instructors but guided by the students' photographs. A student would present their photograph and explain its significance in response to the prompt, and other students would then reply in a discussion forum. Instructors then ask follow-up questions to prompt a deeper discussion of the topic(s).

The nine students enrolled in this course were assigned to take an original photograph that represented a "gendered space," post their photos, and discuss them in small online groups. Next, students were asked to identify themes that resulted from the discussion, and, following these conversations, a new question was posed for the groups to answer and discuss: do you think you could raise a child to be "gender aschematic?"

Photos that students chose to represent gendered spaces ranged from sports fields and parks, to schools, and to stores, to name a few. The below photographs are from a single student's assignment, who used the toy aisle at a large department store to represent a gendered space.



Figure 1. "Boy" Toy Section



Figure 2. "Girl" Toy Section

Debriefing

In order to evaluate critical thinking and student engagement, we utilized the following process:

1. Assessing student responses to the Photovoice prompt and discussion questions, including how well they applied the course concepts to their responses.

2. Analyzing student reflections on how they experienced the Photovoice process; reflection questions were open-ended, asking students how they felt their engagement and critical thinking were impacted by the assignment.

Two instructors analyzed the qualitative responses utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2014) process for thematically analyzing qualitative data. The evidence for both critical thinking and student engagement were present throughout the online discussion of the photos, themes, and new question. For instance, as a result of the Photovoice process, students developed new insights and appreciation of understanding the topic, frequently indicating that, without the use of photographs, they would be unable to fully explore the topic. Furthermore, student feedback also indicated an improvement in students' own perceived engagement and critical thinking skills. One student commented, "It allowed each person to share their interpretation of a photo and compare how different people view a gendered space. It encouraged critical thinking." Students also indicated that taking and responding to photographs forced them to think "more in depth," which is indicative of critical thinking, as well as urged them to engage in discussion.

Assessment

As the common idiom states, "a picture is worth a thousand words." In our experience utilizing Photovoice in a remote course, it is clear that this mantra transfers into the undergraduate Psychology classroom. Despite the course being held online, implementing Photovoice allowed for fruitful, rich discussion in a virtual space. Overall, through this implementation of Photovoice, student feedback was overwhelmingly positive, as students indicated that Photovoice allowed them to think critically and deeply about course topics as well as kept them engaged.

The beauty of the Photovoice is that it can be tailored to multiple types of courses in a variety of disciplines. Because Photovoice is traditionally carried out-in person, the success of implementing the process in an online course demonstrates its applicability in face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses, and in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Photovoice can be used to engage students and challenge their assumptions in a variety of disciplines through concepts that are grounded in feminist theory. We envision Photovoice would be applicable for fostering discussions on challenging topics in a multitude of disciplines, including, but not limited to, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies, Sociology, Philosophy, Political Science, History, and Anthropology.

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