Photovoice: A Participatory Method for Information Science

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ABSTRACT

To keep pace with the social reality created by a Web 2.0 world, contemporary research studies must employ participatory research methods. Photovoice has emerged from the fields of health and community assessment studies as a photo elicitation technique that facilitates participant involvement at all stages of the research process. This poster presents Photovoice as used in an ongoing longitudinal research study assessing the information literacy (IL) skills of students as they transition from high school to university. The poster highlights how this research method can be employed in research practices across the field of information science with a focus on studies of individuals' use of, and engagement with technology.

Keywords

Photovoice, Participatory Research Assessment, Information Literacy Skills

INTRODUCTION

As the look and feel of technology plays as much a role in its adoption and use as the content itself, incorporating participant-generated visual data in research practices allow researchers to interpret and understand phenomena through participants' eyes. Through its integration of participant created photography and focus group interviews, Photovoice has emerged as a valuable method in participatory research assessment. The data and perspective the method provides can be easily adapted to disciplines including, but not limited to, program evaluation, user preference surveys, digital tagging initiatives, educational assessments, and other areas of study. This poster presents the Photovoice method, its advantages and its limitations exemplified through and ongoing study incorporating student's perspectives into an IL assessment for a large Canadian university.

The use of photo elicitation techniques is increasingly relevant to studies of IL where the central emphasis is how individuals "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association, 1989). Photovoice allows individuals to contribute to understanding of IL by using their own perspectives, and is pertinent for studies that focus on disadvantaged or marginalized members or groups in society. IL instructional practices grounded in undergraduates' perspectives must explore their experiences with a view to building curriculum, designing pedagogy and using technological tools that have potential to increase the relevancy of students' learning for the digital contexts in which they live and work.

WHAT IS PHOTOVOICE?

Photovoice was developed by Caroline Wang and colleagues to describe their work with the Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program in China. Its theoretical basis brings together Paulo Freire's theories on participatory education, Feminist theory focusing on giving voice to the disadvantaged, and documentary photography techniques representing societal realities (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The process of information sharing is not limited to the verbal and textual world. Photo elicitation methods have long been used in the fields of Anthropology and Sociology to provide visual cues to stimulate participant responses in research interviews. By integrating visual information in research practices researchers can stimulate the evolution of older processes of understanding in an attempt to gain deeper insight into the human consciousness (Harper, 2002).

What separates Photovoice from the majority of photo elicitation methods is its requirement that the images used in the interviews be participant generated. This strategy empowers participants to engage more deeply in the research process by being in control of the images used in the study. Informed by its theoretical background, Photovoice places a large emphasis on the potential for action-oriented results where the researchers and

participants can take the data and insights gained from the process and use them to affect policy and social change.

Stage 1: Recruitment and Theme Building

The first stage of a Photovoice project can be described as a 'community-buy-in' phase. Researchers are encouraged to partner with the community to jointly determine the goals and objectives of the Photovoice project. Policy makers, advocates, and administrators are often recruited to act as an advisory board for the project (Wang 1999), creating an action-oriented approach where participants have a direct line of communication with the people authorized to plan for their community. In our study, members of the University of Alberta Libraries, the Department of Secondary Education and the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta designed the project with the mutual understanding that results from the study would inform the design of information literacy activities to be implemented by the University to engage undergraduate students and better prepare pre-service teachers and future librarians in ways that resonate with student's experiences and information needs.

After recruitment, meetings with participants are beneficial in determining the initial themes for the pictures to be taken. The researchers can establish themes in advance; however, if this is done through dialogic interactions with participants it can ensure more open and community-driven data collection. For our study the themes were determined from the results of students' information literacy skills tests in the first phase of the project. These tests demonstrated gaps in students' understanding and application of information literacy principles based on the IL standards set by the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2000). The Photovoice activities used in the second phase provide us with additional (visual) data to contextualize students' information practices at the University of Alberta.

Stage 2: Training and Picture Taking

A necessary technical consideration is the type of camera to provide to the participants. Each study must make a determination based on cost, length of project, and participant familiarity. If the study involves a population unfamiliar with photography it may be beneficial to include initial training sessions on camera use. After careful consideration our study chose to distribute a single disposable camera to each participant, along with a researcher-crafted brochure that outlined key issues and details to consider in taking photographs. This allowed for straightforward 'point and shoot' camera use (for participants), as well as easy photofinishing (for researchers), including print copies and digital files of all photos. The costs were also more reasonable than providing digital cameras or relying on students' own cameras (e.g., on cell phones) for data retrieval.

Figure 1. Example of participant generated photos from University of Alberta TELF study

The Photovoice method requires participants be educated in the aims of the study and ethical considerations of picture taking in the community before they use the cameras. Protecting privacy, personal safety, and ensuring accurate representation are factors that need to be considered by both participants and researchers to ensure ethically sound data. This practice has the added benefit of encouraging participants to think and act critically as they explore the Photovoice process. Participants are not passive data providers but actors in the research whose choices influence the results and outcomes.

Participants must be provided with a time frame in which to take pictures and return the cameras to the research team for processing. Giving the participants copies of the photos and establishing joint ownership of the images provides another opportunity for increasing participant engagement in the study by allowing them a sense of ownership in the dissemination of the data.

Stage 3: Photo Selection Focus Groups and Analysis

Participants are brought together in focus groups to discuss a selection of the photos taken. These discussions may be structured by guiding questions or use unstructured dialogic approaches. Focus groups techniques that incorporate Photovoice have the unique advantage of being able to both contextualize the photographic data using the participants' own perspectives and to codify the data presented by each person by having the participants themselves identify common themes and concepts.

It is important to include a discussion regarding any photographs *not* taken due to ethical or practical considerations. This allows the participants to contribute to an analysis of potential gaps in the visual information and to discuss how that might influence the results of the study.

Stage 4: Results and Community Change

As with all research, dissemination of the findings is critical. Photovoice goes one step further due to its emphasis on affecting change. This can be enacted through displays and presentations to stakeholder communities (e.g., in our study, teachers or academic librarians), private accomplishments of participants (e.g., as demonstrated by pre-/post-testing of IL skills) or wider publication of the results, beyond typical academic venues. The final phase of our longitudinal study will also take the information gained from the Photovoice sessions and the IL assessment tests to

inform the design of future IL educational programs and strategies for the University of Alberta.

ADVANTAGES

> Photovoice is valuable because it empowers the students to become more aware of their surroundings. Students see themselves as researchers collecting data, analyzing those data, and doing something with them to help solve problems. It provides a process and resources for students to amplify their voices in order to influence and gain power to shape the university policies. (Goodhart et al., 2006)

Photovoice facilitates greater involvement of the participants compared to many conventional research methods. Not only do participants provide data, but through their selection of photographs and the group discussions of themes and issues, participants are also involved in data analysis. This increased participation adds to the validity of Photovoice studies by reflecting results that are determined and emphasized by the community studied, not by the researcher.

Photovoice offers an innovative way to triangulate research results as multiple streams of information gathering are used: visual verbal information, group discussion, and individual reflection in taking photos. If the method is used in a larger study it can increase reliability by comparing Photovoice results to, for example, survey responses. By using Photovoice data alongside the IL tests in our study, we can enhance reliability of the data and increase the probability that new programs accurately reflect students' needs.

The camera itself offers a unique opportunity to advertise the research aims and goals to a wider community. By allowing participants to record images of their own life they are interacting with the public; this creates the potential for interaction with non-participant community members and a discussion of the activity, itself which can promote the research to a wider audience than can be reached in a study confined to the four walls of a laboratory. When combined with snowball sampling, this can also aid recruitment.

As a way of enhancing interview data, Photovoice can act as a memory trigger aiding in the recall of past experiences. It can aid in the illustration of participants' perspective by allowing an audience to not just hear their words, but also experience the world the way they see it.

Photovoice has proven to be a method for engaging groups who may have difficulty articulating their views in traditional research (e.g., youth, homeless, second language learners), thus increasing the scope of potential participants.

LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation is the potential for high costs both in time and funding. The method requires a substantial time commitment from researchers and participants. This may warrant the use of financial incentives to aid recruitment. The cost of camera equipment, processing fees, and adequately trained personnel may also hinder its use in small projects.

Important factors to consider if interested in using Photovoice as a research method are the ethical issues surrounding privacy and fair representation. When participants are out in their community taking pictures the researcher cannot control what they ultimately do. To mitigate potential harm it is crucial that all studies adequately educate participants of the ethics involved in proper research.

Finally, it is important to remember that photos used in the study cannot function as a data set on their own and should not be used as such. Photovoice requires participant discussion and analysis to establish meaning and relevance.

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