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**Qualitative Methods as Decolonised Pedagogical Praxis: Student and  
Educator Reflections on Embedding Photovoice in Undergraduate Course  
Curricula**

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## **Abstract**

Photovoice is a qualitative research method where participants are empowered to curate and expand upon their everyday lives through photography. When used as a learning activity embedded within psychological curricula, Photovoice is an empowering tool which promotes student engagement and attainment. The present report reflects upon the use of Photovoice in small group teaching from both the student and educator's perspectives. It presents the rationale and methods for using Photovoice within undergraduate small group teaching, and the use is evaluated and discussed. Photovoice reduces or removes hierarchical and normative power structures in the learning environment, centres student voices, and grounds abstract psychological concepts. Photovoice can be used to complement and extend other teaching practice to promote equitable outcomes and educational attainment for all students.

*Key words:* Photovoice, decolonisation, pedagogy, student empowerment, reflections

# **Qualitative Methods as Decolonised Pedagogical Praxis: Student and Educator Reflections on Embedding Photovoice in Undergraduate Course Curricula**

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as an invitation for educators to rethink assumptions about the role of the learner and the learning environment (Rapanta et al., 2021). This shift – from passive to active learning, campus-based to remote, hierarchical to democratic – presents an opportunity to craft dynamic and active learning environments which promote engagement and meaningfully ground otherwise abstract concepts from the curriculum.

Active learning environments, defined as a learning context in which the educator and educational activities explicitly afford students agency and autonomy in learning (Lombardi & Shipley, 2021), are associated with improvements to both traditional academic outcomes (e.g., exam performance), and graduate attribute skills (i.e., skills beyond those that are discipline-specific, such as transferable or soft skills; Freeman et al., 2014). Active learning strategies also provide more equitable outcomes for underrepresented minority students, students from a low socio-economic background, and students with lower academic attainment (Ballen et al., 2017; Burke et al., 2020; Theobald et al., 2020). As such, to remove attainment and access barriers, it is important to carefully consider how to create active learning environments within higher education settings.

Qualitative methods are well placed to serve as the basis for an active learning environment within wider curricula. That is, educators can use qualitative methods as tasks or activities to promote learning outcomes. Some of the strengths of qualitative methods align directly with the proposed outcomes of active learning, such as deeper understandings of the construct of interest, situation of the researcher as the primary instrument for meaning making, and the inductive formation of concepts and theories from details (Atieno, 2009). Similarly, both approaches align with decolonised teaching practice, the ethos of which is to contextualise knowledge within a wider historical and cultural framework, deconstruct existing hierarchies within educational spaces, and structure curricula in a manner which allows every individual access to equitable outcomes. This article is intended to outline and reflect upon the use of the qualitative method Photovoice as an active learning tool from both the student and educator's perspective.

## **Photovoice as a methodological and pedagogical tool**

As a research tool, Photovoice empowers participants to cultivate social change by documenting, reflecting upon, creatively expressing, and communicating their realities (Budig et al., 2018). Cameras are provided to participants who use photographs to document and critically reflect upon their everyday lived experiences in line with a research question. This approach values knowledge grounded in experience, assuming that certain individuals have an epistemic, social and political advantage over others for raising and answering particular questions. Thus, Photovoice challenges colonialist hierarchies in the knowledge creation process; the individual is transformed from a passive research subject into the *de facto* expert and curator of the knowledge production endeavour (C. Wang & Burris, 1997).

As a pedagogic tool, Photovoice similarly challenges colonial praxis and forms an emancipatory and decolonised educational context. This is because traditional power dynamics are removed or reversed, diverse perspectives are centred, and learners are encouraged to become aware of their

individual reality through critical investigation of their everyday experiences (Winarti, 2018). Furthermore, when embedded within a syllabus, Photovoice asks students to consider how their lived experiences can be explained through psychological theory and, through discussion, students can scaffold each other's understanding of core concepts. Thus, Photovoice lends itself well to form an active learning context.

When using Photovoice as a project or learning activity, students can – and should – be included at all points of the project design, including research question formulation and assessment design. The research question can be developed in line with curriculum requirements and assessed through a variety of means (e.g., lab report, blog post, oral presentation, prose, art exhibit, etc.). Where students are included in research dissemination – for example, as academic co-authors, such as in the present article – individual contributions are recognised, academically non-traditional perspectives and forms of knowledge are reinforced, and direct professional advantages are gained by all members of the learning process. As such, the project would not only serve to meet the immediate course requirements but also have the potential to improve employment and educational outcomes for students.

## The Present Project

The present Photovoice projects were situated within a second-year compulsory social psychology module in a psychology undergraduate program over a two-week period. The present project included 5 students across two groups. Students received a two-hour small group teaching session in which the data was analysed collaboratively, with the educator serving as a facilitator. All students who participated in the projects were invited to contribute to and receive authorship on the present paper.

The projects followed a sequential 6-step process (see Supplementary Materials for resources). In step one, students assumed ownership of the project and, using the module curriculum as a guide, identified a research question of interest. For this work, two groups of students independently selected their own research question of interest. Both groups examined the extent to which social hierarchies exist within the collegiate system. University campuses are host to distinctive and complex social networks. Any given individual will occupy a plurality of social positions dependent on their subjective characteristics (van Wietmarschen, 2021). For example, students from higher or lower socio-economic backgrounds, or athletes and non-athletic students, are likely to occupy different hierarchical social positions within a network. These social positions have a range of implications for current and future social interactions, opportunities, and experiences. As such, this topic was identified by both groups independently as both salient and important enough for further exploration.

In step two, over two weeks, students captured a series of photographs which were associated with or reflected the research question. Students were asked to take 5 photographs as part of the assignment (S1 [supplementary materials] provides the precise instructions provided to students); all students completed this task. Each photograph was accompanied by a brief narrative explanation to aid later analysis. Students tended to write a short paragraph explaining what was happening in the photograph, why the photograph was taken, and what the photograph meant to them. Students submitted their narratives and photographs to the tutor 48 hours prior to the teaching session. The tutor printed the photographs out ahead of the session, stored photographs securely on Nexus 365, and provided resources for students to create mind-maps or posters during analysis.

In step three, at the beginning of the small group teaching session, students engaged in personal reflexivity to aid in understanding how their individual lens impacts their understanding and analysis.

To complete this, students were provided with 15-20 minutes to individually write a personal reflection on their own life experiences, intersecting identities, values and beliefs in order to identify their impact on their analysis and interpretation of the data. The time scale of the reflexivity task was dictated by time constraints of the 2-hour teaching session. Students were encouraged to engage in reflexivity throughout the analysis phase. As part of the assessment, students were required to include a section on reflexivity; the instructions for this were left vague so as to empower the students, ensure that students were emotionally contained and not required to overshare, and to not dictate the content.

In step four, students selected and discussed each photograph. In both sessions, all photographs were discussed. The discussions using a slightly modified version of the SHOWeD technique (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1998; see S2 in Supplementary Materials for hand out used). This technique consists of different questions that relate to the photograph, slightly adapted to fit the learning context as follows: What do you see here? What's really happening here? How does this relate to our lives? Why did you take a picture of this? Why does this happen? How does this relate to the research question? How could this image help induce change? These discussions centred around identifying the themes, patterns, or experiences evoked by each image.

Students actively constructed knowledge socially through group discussion, which illuminated perspectives or clarified theoretically and academically meaningful points. Students documented the analysis on A2 pieces of paper, and created mind-maps around each photograph affixed to the page. In step five, students constructed an understanding of how each image related to the research question and identified specific theories or constructs from the social psychological course content to explain their deductions. This analytical step required students to view photographs both in isolation and as part of the wider constellation of images to make the most persuasive narrative. In step six, students identified their own assessment format (e.g., lab report, blog post, science communication article) and submitted these for feedback.

We will now reflect on the experience of using Photovoice as a pedagogic tool from the viewpoint of a student (JLR) and the educator (OR).

### Reflections on Photovoice from a student

For our class, the Photovoice teaching method was used to facilitate our learning in the social psychology module in which we were asked the question of whether social hierarchy is present in academia. Overall, the Photovoice teaching method helped me to become more aware of the social psychology concepts that we discussed throughout my day-to-day life. If not for this teaching method, then I would not have thought so deeply about the pervasiveness of social hierarchy within academia, as well as within the world in general. My understanding of social identity theory and social dominance orientation was certainly enhanced by doing the Photovoice project which has allowed me to be able to think more critically about the theories. Generally, I would regard the Photovoice method as a useful teaching tool for getting the students to think more deeply about specific subject areas whilst applying it to their daily lives.

However, although the Photovoice method can be a beneficial teaching tool, there are some drawbacks to using this to teach students regularly. One of these drawbacks is that I do not believe that I will be able to reliably use the Photovoice work to support my arguments or critical evaluations in my future essays and exams. For assessed essays it is preferable for us to include examples and citations of published psychological research, so it will be highly unlikely that I will ever use the personal and subjective Photovoice work in my future writings.

Furthermore, another drawback can be found in the photo-taking stage of the work. I found that attempting to take photos of people in public settings made me feel quite anxious. Whilst this wasn't too distressing for me as a generally non-anxious person, for others who are much more prone to anxiety, the photo-taking exercise may be much more difficult for them. This problem, however, may be lessened by making it a collaborative group task to take the photos rather than an individual task. If I had gone out with a small group of 2 or 3 people to take the photos, then it would have lessened my anxieties of taking photos of people in the public, although the anxious feelings would not be completely mitigated. Making the photo-taking stage a group exercise would have also decreased the stress of constantly thinking about where I could take the best photos for the Photovoice project. Providing the options to take the photos individually or collectively may be the best way of finding the right approach to the Photovoice project for a particular group of students.

Despite these drawbacks, there are still some more useful aspects of the Photovoice work, one of which is the reflexivity task. Being made to think about how my past experiences and identity would affect my qualitative analyses of the photos proved to be beneficial for enhancing my critical thinking skills. It is usually quite easy to let our biases guide us when we are unaware of the reasons as to why we might be biased in the first place. However, the reflexivity task enabled me to be much more aware of my own biases as this is the first time I have ever engaged in reflexivity, meaning that my biases would be slightly mitigated during the Photovoice analysis. The best thing about the reflexivity task is that I will now be more aware of some of my major biases in the future as I now think more critically about how my opinions will be affected by my past experiences. Moreover, the qualitative analyses also generally helped with my critical thinking skills as it caused us to apply the psychological theory to real-life situations that were relevant to us. Another beneficial aspect of the Photovoice work is that the tutorial in which we analysed the photos was more fun than usual, which made the learning process better as retaining the information seemed to be much easier.

As I stated previously, I do believe that this Photovoice teaching method is beneficial for teaching students if used occasionally. Whilst the method is not very helpful with essay technique or for providing evidence for future essays, the reflexivity task and the qualitative analyses task are certainly useful for boosting our skills in critical thinking, which we can utilize throughout our lives in general. If the Photovoice teaching method is used as a specific learning tool, then it will prove to be quite useful for the teaching of students.

## Reflections on Photovoice from the educator

I used Photovoice as a project tool to increase students' critical and original thinking. The objective of the session was to facilitate connection between real world experiences and abstract theories, which students could use to understand course material more fully and use as original and creative lines of thinking within later assessed work (e.g., exams, summative essays). Ultimately, the project was a vastly enjoyable teaching experience. It was fun to learn about the students' experiences and to see *a-ha!* moments in real time.

Students were thoroughly engaged with the process, if not a little nervous at first. They made thoughtful and considered discussion points which negotiated the analytical narrative. Students could complete the analysis largely independently, but needed some clear scaffolding of the analytical process at the beginning. Once students became more cognisant in what qualitative analysis looks like, they became confident and required little support.

I was surprised that the time costs of planning and running the Photovoice project were reduced compared to normal teaching. Giving students agency over the research question and focus of the project greatly decreased time costs, as this process flipped the teacher-student power dynamic and

required the students to prepare for the session. This allowed the students to take up the role of expert and educator. I did not assign students any reading on Photovoice methodology, as I did not want to blur the lines between facilitator and participant prior to the analysis session. However, students were assigned reading in line with the research question and course requirements.

It is notable that, despite their agency over the project, students found it difficult to select an assessment style beyond traditional essay formats. In future, I would provide a list of options with exemplars – such as Strauss' (2018) blog post, Lechuga-Peña and colleagues' (2021) exhibition events, or academic video essays – to help students visualise non-traditional assessment formats. This difficulty may have been exacerbated by the fact that the analysis output was non-digital, and students relied on their own photographs of the analysis to support their writing up.

There were ethical considerations of using Photovoice, revolving primarily about data privacy and student safety. Students were required to obtain consent from people shown in their photographs prior to taking them. Students were told to remain vigilant and safe at all times, and to only bring photographs or discussion points which they felt emotionally able to manage. Students were instructed that the analytical environment was a safe and brave space, and to treat each other with kindness and respect. All students adhered to the guidelines and did not present with any misunderstandings or difficulties with ethical practice. As the photographs were not used for formal analysis and were only viewed by the students who took them, ethical approval was not attained for this project. Where educators may want to use the analysis from Photovoice projects for more formalised academic output, ethical approval will need to be attained and educators will have to carefully navigate student inclusion in this process. This may be best achieved through engaging students in a short period of planning in advance of the start of the project to agree the research question or negotiating with the ethical review board the remit of potential research questions.

The present project took place with very small groups. However, I think this pedagogical tool could be scaled up to other small group teaching (e.g., seminars with up to 20 students), where students are parsed into small groups and the educator rotates between groups to facilitate analysis or where the entire group analyses a singular photograph together and then moves to smaller group-based analysis.

There may be challenges with engaging with Photovoice for some students who struggle with qualitative methods or participatory action research. For example, some students may not feel comfortable taking photographs or may not see the utility in photographs as data. Where this poses a challenge to engagement, these students should be encouraged to explore other mediums, such as through creating their own art, finding images online which reflect their perspective, or allowing students to stage photographs. By working flexibly in this manner, students retain power within the project and are able to authentically discuss their reality and have their needs met.

Further, some students may also find the analysis challenging, as Photovoice relies on one's ability to understand and work with visual material, and one's ability to see patterns, symbols, and themes towards synthesising data into a coherent narrative. To ensure equitable outcomes, the educator must profile the learning environment (Coulson & Harvey, 2013), and consider student level, capacity, learning outcomes, and type and degree of peer contact prior to analysis. By considering the learning environment, the educator can curate a space where Photovoice as a pedagogic tool is pitched at a level all students can access. Moreover, the educator can consider how to model and scaffold the development of reflective thinking and metacognition skills required for qualitative analysis. Scaffolding in this case may require the educator to adopt a reflective approach to the presentation and discussion of photographs, sharing their own reflective stories, thoughts, thinking,

and analysis processes. Educators may find it beneficial to use written exemplars to model different forms or levels of reflection. Educators should remain intellectually curious with students and authentically use praise to motivate them and to encourage good practice.

Finally, while the projects did not in themselves facilitate social change – a core tenant of the methodology – the analysis did foster discussions on '*what now?*'. By looking towards the future, students were able to identify how social change could be brought about and could consider original contributions which may support arguments made in future academic work. However, potential applications to future work could be emphasised so that students are better able to meet the demands of the hidden curriculum. This is particularly important given the reward structure in psychology undergraduate courses in the UK award higher marks to original and creative thinking. Photovoice projects could serve not only as direct evidence for future work, but also as a method of critically analysing everyday life, and the applications of these findings into coursework should be highlighted more.

## Conclusion

Photovoice is an empowering and useful tool for promoting active learning environments and positive student outcomes. This approach is a departure from conventional pedagogic practice and embraces decolonised and active learning environments to ensure student educational attainment and graduate attribute acquisition. While Photovoice may not meet all the needs of students and educators, it can be used to complement and extend other teaching practice in a manner which is enjoyable and beneficial to all.

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