



Smart Phones and Photovoice: Exploring Participant Lives with Photos of the Everyday

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Even when we have significant access to our research participants, it is difficult to study other people's personal, in-the-moment thoughts and experiences, which often hold important insights. During interviews and focus groups, participants might not remember how they felt at a particular moment in the past. They may even dismiss those insights as unimportant and, therefore, fail to bring them up. If our research techniques depend primarily on participants' abilities to discuss insights from memory—as many qualitative methods do—we risk losing valuable information in our research studies.

Photovoice methods help researchers capture this covert data by asking participants to take photographs over a span of time—ranging from a couple of weeks to several months—in order to document experiences and catalog their perceptions. With this method, photographs are used,

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both as data for the study, and as memory aids that help participants articulate their viewpoints. Together with interviews and focus groups, the photos provide rich, narrative data for qualitative inquiry.

As researchers, we often think about our work as the search for and collection of evidence, and then the use of that evidence, alongside our own expertise, to construct new knowledge. But photovoice is a participatory method, which positions both researchers *and participants* as the collectors of data and the makers of meaning. Photovoice is flexible enough to help us pursue a variety of research questions in the Digital Humanities.

This chapter outlines how the photovoice method operates, and we offer practical advice for implementing this technique in your own research projects. With this in mind, we outline our study on the value and pitfalls of community engagement, which investigates the various ways that students, partner organizations, and instructors navigate collaborative projects between the community and the university. We asked people from each of these groups to take pictures while their work together unfolded, in order to explore the relationships between these different stakeholders throughout their collaboration. Our goal was to understand the impacts and obstacles of engagement work. The photos ultimately helped us recognize that each participant group had very different goals and expectations for the project, which were sometimes in tension with other stakeholders' goals. This gives us valuable insight into building more productive relationships in engagement work. Throughout this chapter, we lay out the strengths and weaknesses of this method, and offer a step-by-step guide to using photovoice in an informed and innovative way.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY AND PARTICIPATORY METHOD

In 1997, Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris published an article outlining photovoice as a method used in participatory research. Wang and Burris note that photovoice is powerful because it gives participants the opportunity to “identify, represent, and enhance their community” using their own pictures.¹ Photovoice is grounded in

¹Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, “Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment,” *Health Education & Behavior* 24, no. 3 (1997): 369–387.

Paulo Freire's theories of social transformation and community activism, aimed at raising critical consciousness and using methods that interrogate power dynamics. With Freire as a starting point, Wang, Burris, and Ping first developed photovoice methods to help women document the Women's Reproductive Health and Development program in Yunnan, China. They framed the process as a combination of empowerment education, feminist practice, and documentary photography. Since the 1997 article, Wang has published a string of articles expanding upon this method.² Caricia Catalini and Meredith Minkler also offer an excellent overview of the method and its many applications.³ Photovoice's versatility has inspired researchers in many fields to apply it, including public health,⁴ community action scholarship,⁵ environmental studies,⁶ and technical writing.⁷

In addition to its applications across disciplines, photovoice also aids reflection and collaboration within the communities it seeks to study. In Joyce Yi-Frazier et al.'s study on public health and diabetes noted above, participants uploaded their photos to Instagram and tagged them with

²See "Photovoice as a Participatory Health Promotion Strategy," *Health Promotion International* 13, no. 1 (1998): 75–86; "Photovoice: A Participatory Action Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health," *Journal of Women's Health* 8, no. 2 (1999): 185–192; "Who Knows the Streets as Well as the Homeless? Promoting Personal and Community Action Through Photovoice," *Health Promotion Practice* 1, no. 1 (2000): 81–89; "Youth Participation in Photovoice as a Strategy for Community Change," *Journal of Community Practice* 14, no. 1–2 (2006): 147–161; and many others.

³Caricia Catalini and Meredith Minkler, "Photovoice: A Review of the Literature in Health and Public Health," *Health Education & Behavior* 37, no. 3 (2010): 424–451.

⁴Joyce P. Yi-Frazier, Katherine Cochrane, Connor Mitrovich, Michael Pascual, Emil Buscaino, Lauren Eaton, Neil Panlasigui, Bailey Clopp, and Faisal Malik, "Using Instagram as a Modified Application of Photovoice for Storytelling and Sharing in Adolescents with Type 1 Diabetes," *Qualitative Health Research* 25, no. 10 (2015): 1372–1382.

⁵Alix Holtby, Kate Klein, Katie Cook, and Robb Travers, "To Be Seen or Not to Be Seen: Photovoice, Queer and Trans Youth, and the Dilemma of Representation," *Action Research* 13, no. 4 (2015): 317–335.

⁶Caroline Fusco, Fiona Moola, Guy Faulkner, Ron Buliung, and Vanessa Richichi, "Toward an Understanding of Children's Perceptions of Their Transport Geographies: (Non)active School Travel and Visual Representations of the Built Environment," *Journal of Transport Geography* 20, no. 1 (2012): 62–70.

⁷Patricia Sullivan, "Participating with Pictures: Promises and Challenges of Using Images as a Technique in Technical Communication Research," *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 47, no. 1 (2017): 86–108.

specific hashtags linked to the project.⁸ As a result, researchers could easily access photo data and participants were able to interact with each other through Instagram. During focus groups, Yi-Frazier et al. found that social networks were an important tool for dealing with chronic diseases like diabetes. While in many photovoice studies participants upload their photographs to private folders and share them with others for the first time during focus groups, this study reveals a different model, which emphasizes community-building.⁹

As a result, photovoice has two major benefits. First, the method can be used to study a wide variety of topics that are often subjective in nature, including processes, practices, habits, and perceptions. Photos, when paired with other methods, provide more robust participant reflection when compared with traditional focus groups or interviews. Second, photovoice allows participants to collect data quickly and easily throughout their day using just their phones. Therefore, participation does not require major investments in time, money, or training, which is especially important when working with community organizations.

Photovoice has three main goals:

1. to enable individuals to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns;
2. to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs;
3. and to reach policymakers and spur change with these insights.¹⁰

While more traditional qualitative methods, like interviews, require participants to respond to questions that researchers develop, photovoice allows participants more freedom to interpret photo prompts as they see fit. As a result, participants produce unique photos and then have a chance to analyze their photos during interviews and focus groups *alongside* researchers. The collaboration between researchers and participants

⁸Yi-Frazier et al., "Using Instagram as a Modified Application of Photovoice for Storytelling and Sharing in Adolescents with Type 1 Diabetes."

⁹Using social media as the means through which participants store and share their photos would require careful consideration and cooperation with your university's Institutional Review Board, the governing body at your university that oversees research on human beings.

¹⁰Caroline C. Wang, "Photovoice: A Participatory Action Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health," *Journal of Women's Health* 8, no. 2 (1999): 185–192.

throughout the study allows us to see clearly how both groups are involved in interpreting the data.

Photovoice creates a space for people to represent themselves, as opposed to having their voices mediated only through a researcher's analysis. It operates like an autoethnography, which allows a researcher to explore their own experiences through self-narration. Participants make rhetorical choices about the timing, content, and framing of photos, meaning, they decide how and what to communicate through these images. In order to provide some guidance, however, researchers usually craft specific prompts to help participants take photos that are relevant to the study's research questions. This is yet another way that both researchers and participants construct meaning together using this method.

This kind of collaborative knowledge work became important in our study, particularly because we were exploring how students, instructors, and community partners (the organizations that agree to partner with college classes) navigated their relationships with each other inside the university engagement framework. In the next section, we discuss our study in depth. This case illustrates how photovoice operated in our own research, while also providing a detailed discussion of the inner workings of the method. This section and the subsequent discussion takes you from our initial pilot test, through the intricacies of research design and revision, and finally to other considerations you might make before you implement a study like this. Even for more exploratory research, it is important to consider how our method impacts the kinds of data we are able to gather and, therefore, how it affects the insights that are drawn from a study such as this one.

USING PHOTOS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

The bulk of research on course-driven community engagement focuses on teacher perceptions or student reflections, but there are few studies that examine the experience of community partners or the relationships between these different groups. This case examines a range of projects typical of engagement work in upper-level business writing and technical writing courses at Purdue University. Because most engagement scholarship focuses on student experiences and learning, instead of on the

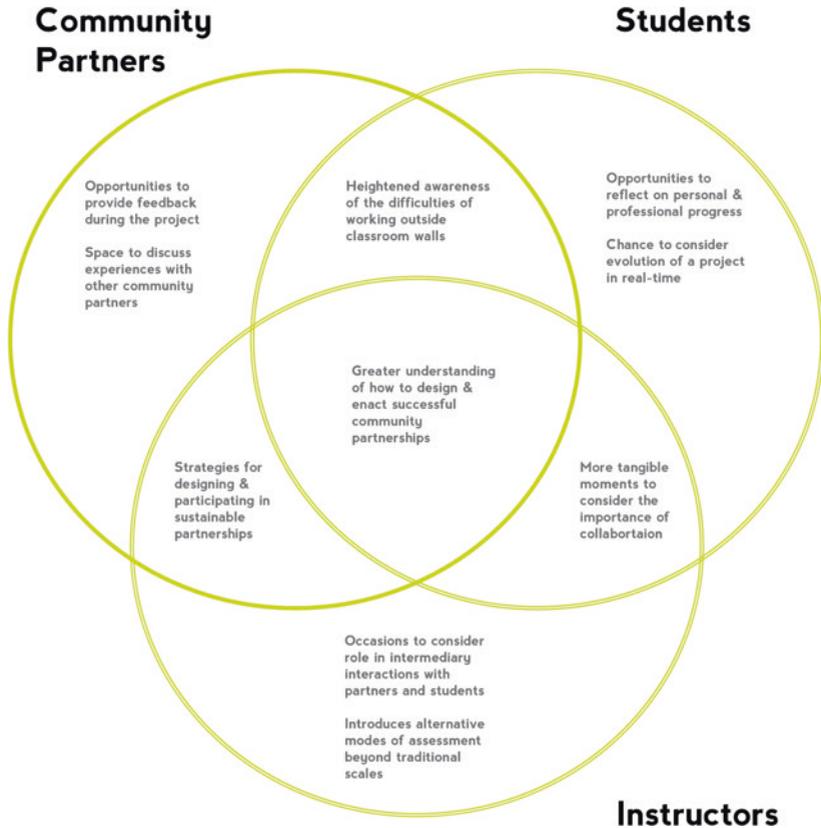


Fig. 8.1 Intended outcomes for stakeholders involved in the photovoice engagement study

complex ecology of goals, concerns, and standpoints of community partners, instructors, and students together, we started to wonder how these other stakeholders perceived project processes and outcomes. We began our inquiry with three key research questions (Fig. 8.1):

1. How do each of these stakeholder groups (students, instructors, and community partners) position and value engagement work?
2. When there are problems or failures during community projects, how do participants address these breakdowns?

3. What outcomes does engagement work have for students, instructors, and community partners—both collectively, and for individuals?

Photovoice was an appropriate method for this project for several reasons, but initially, we considered it because of its ease when working with participants outside the university. Photovoice provides a large amount of qualitative data with a low time commitment for participants. Ethically, we needed to consider methods that account for the material constraints on our nonprofit partners, who are working full-time and often lack the time and resources to take part in extended research with academics.

Before the study begins, researchers usually pilot, or test, their methods and techniques with a limited group of people. Even on a small scale, pilot testing helps researchers see their methods in action and identify any logistical problems that might arise during the study. We chose to test the photograph prompts and focus group questions with a few people from each participant group (in this case, students, instructors, and community partners). These participants only took pictures for three weeks, then met for focus groups. Thanks to the pilot, we discovered the need to add short, written reflections to the study in order to capture more participant observations. Additionally, we revised the language and order of focus group questions, because some of our pilot participants did not understand them completely (see “Designing the Focus Groups”). We also extended the timeline, to allow for more participant recruitment and to provide participants more time to collect data.

Figure 8.2 is a photo of a mural taken during the pilot study. Initially, we tried to analyze what this image says about engagement on our campus. This picture was taken downtown, so it might tell us that intellectual engagement happens outside traditional classrooms. We could guess that the project had something to do with art or artists, or maybe even the local music scene. However, during the focus group, we learned that this picture was taken because it depicts the collaboration between several groups involved in the community project, including:

- artists who collaborated to create this specific mural;
- the city that funded and permitted the project;



Fig. 8.2 Colorful mural in downtown area. Pilot study photo, Michaela Cooper, 2015

- the community partner who organized this public art project;
- and the students who developed a mobile walking tour of all these new pieces of public art.

Without conducting focus groups with the participant who took this photo, we might have never fully understood their project, or the large network of stakeholders that were involved. In follow-up interviews and focus groups, participants often discuss the people, places, and objects that are implicated but not necessarily visible in their photos.

Based on the pilot test, we redesigned the research instruments and broke our study up into two phases:

- **Phase One:** Participants take photos and submit short, written responses (approximately 150 words) that are meant to provide updates on the project or reflections on their photos, throughout the duration of the community project.
- **Phase Two:** Participants are invited to take part in a focus group with other participants from their stakeholder groups (instructors with other instructors, students with other students, and community partners with other community partners).

Toward the end of Phase One, we reviewed the collected materials and adapted our focus group questions to respond to the initial data. This allowed us to ask both general and specific questions during Phase Two. In this final focus group, we also provided participants with the images that they had taken throughout the study.

Remember: images can be difficult to understand on their own. That is why this method requires other data in addition to photographs. This data often comes from written reflections, interviews, and focus groups. If you utilize this method in your own research, it is important to consider what kind of supplementary data you want to collect, as well as how and when you plan to collect it. Ultimately, our design was meant to gather multiple types of data across a span of time, culminating in a highly interactive focus group where participants could actively reflect on their experiences in the study.

For participants, though, it all begins with the prompts they receive at the beginning of their data collection. The prompts that researchers put forth frame the entire study for participants. Prompts have a huge impact on the kinds of data you collect and even on how invested participants become in the research. With this in mind, we suggest crafting photo and reflection prompts with attention to the various ways in which participants might interpret what you will ask them. Also, consider how changing the language or phrasing of these prompts may change the kinds of data that they will gather.

Keep in mind that prompts should be short and direct. You need participants to feel confident that they know what you are asking them to respond to. You should also aim for open-ended questions that allow participants to interpret their experiences in a variety of ways. Simple, direct prompts can still lead to very complex and interesting data.

Again, we highly recommend that researchers pilot test these prompts on others, even informally, to find out how people interpret the questions. For example, our first draft of prompts was simple, direct, and open-ended:

1. What does community engagement look like?
2. What does service-learning look like?

However, by piloting these questions and asking others to critique them, we found that they were too vague.

Additionally, the terminology of the two questions was confusing to many participants. As engagement scholars, we are aware of the subtle differences between terms like “service-learning” and “engagement”. Service-learning is a model that emphasizes student learning processes and often manifests as volunteerism linked to a class and written reflections, or larger class projects as “a place for collaborative inquiry with the students and community partners.”¹¹ On the other hand, the term “community engagement” refers to the more general notion of engaging with people or organizations outside the university in some capacity. These terms are nuanced and often overlap. We assumed that different participants would identify with one or the other, which is why we originally chose to use both terms. We realized during our pilot that, for nonscholars, using both terms is unnecessarily confusing, because participants spend more time wondering what the difference is or worrying if they are supposed to understand the difference, than documenting their experiences.

We reworked the prompts so they included a suggested quantity and time scale (“as many photos as you would like each week”) in order to provide some guidance for participants. The final prompts are still open enough to allow photo-takers to look at the topic from a variety of different angles, but they are more clear and concrete than the previous set. This revision made it easier for participants to respond confidently to our questions with their photos. The final prompt we settled on was:

Throughout the semester, we’d like you to take photos that describe your community engagement work. Please take as many photos as you would like each week. Some suggested ideas to get you started are below.

1. What does a “day in the life” of your community engagement project look like?
2. Have you had any major successes or obstacles to overcome during the project?
3. Are there any people, places, or things that have affected your experience?

¹¹Ellen Cushman, “Sustainable Service Learning Programs,” *College Composition and Communication* 54, no. 1 (2002): 40–65.

After finalizing our prompts, we moved on to participant recruitment. Recruitment was a large concern for our study, since we were working with three distinct groups who were geographically and institutionally dispersed. When we designed the study, we wrote a general recruitment email that could be sent to instructors, students, and community partners. Since instructors set up their community engagement projects and serve as the link between students and community partners, we started by sending our recruitment email to the listserv of instructors teaching the classes on which we were focusing. Once those who wanted to participate contacted us, we set up a time to come to their classes and speak to their students in person. When we visited classrooms, we followed the script of the email we had composed and asked instructors to step out of the room, to ensure students that their participation in the study would not affect their grades in the class, since the instructor would not know who participated and who did not. We also reached out to their community partners via email, to request their participation in the study. Because of the three groups, recruitment required a multipronged approach and a fair amount of time, so we got started at the beginning of the semester—even if the community engagement project did not actually start until much later in the term.

When we started working on our study, we decided that a semester timeline would be appropriate, since our campus runs on a 16-week semester schedule, and that would provide our participants with plenty of time to take photos. For us, the semester roughly broke down this way: We spent the first 3–4 weeks of the semester recruiting and setting up the file system for participants to submit their photos, which allowed participants the time to get settled into their projects. Then, throughout the majority of the semester (Weeks 5–12), participants were taking photos and submitting reflections to their folders. Every two weeks, we sent reminders via email, which was frequent enough that they did not forget, but not so frequent that they got annoyed with the messages.

It is important to note that since different instructors structured their projects according to different needs and timelines, participants contributed photos at different times during the duration of the semester. Some uploaded a mass of photos and narratives between weeks 6 and 9, while others uploaded a couple each week; this depended upon where they were in their projects. Periodically, we would look over the data and

take notes on the participant-generated data, keeping these in mind as we thought about our focus group questions.

Because community engagement projects tend to wind down along with the semester, we reached out to our participants during weeks 13 and 14, to ask if they would participate in our focus groups. We scheduled these sessions for the last two weeks of the semester. After the focus groups were held, we assembled all of the data from throughout the semester and began to look for common themes among different stakeholder groups, different types of data, and different approaches.

We recruited participants from our total participant population and the majority of our photo-takers agreed to participate. We were concerned that a single focus group which included students, teachers, and community partners would create a power differential that inadvertently silenced certain people or skewed participants' responses in the focus group. For example, students might feel pressured to alter their opinions, knowing an instructor was sitting next to them. Because of this, we administered separate focus groups for students, teachers, and community partners.

As each participant entered the room, we handed them their stack of photos, which we had printed prior to the focus group. It was important for us to have printed, rather than digital copies, so that participants could see all their photos at once. They could also create different narratives, by organizing them in different ways as we asked them questions during the focus group. We felt that this gave them space to reflect on their experiences, since they were able to consult all of their data.

When writing focus group questions, it is important to understand that the order in which questions are presented can make a big difference in how participants respond. We began with a short task of arranging images, which allowed participants to take some time to review their own photos. The initial question you choose will frame the entire line of questioning, so it is key not to begin with anything too difficult or probing. After the initial icebreaker question, the rest of the questions should build upon one another, advancing in cognitive difficulty or emotional investment, depending on the research you are doing. Each participant should be given ample time to answer each question before moving onto the next. This helps researchers to be sure that no single person does most of the talking. Be sure to end on a final question that helps your participants ease out of what can sometimes be a mentally or emotionally intense hour. It is also a good idea to allow participants to give feedback

on the research, or to give them the space to voice any additional opinions or concerns that the questions did not address.

Our Focus Group Questions:

1. Arrange your own images from most significant to least. Tell us a little about why you chose to take this first, most significant image.
2. And the least significant—what prompted you to take this picture?
3. What kinds of images do you think your students/instructors/the community partners would capture if they were doing this study?
4. What do you think your pictures reveal about the nature of community engagement work?
5. What, if anything, do you wish you had known going into this project?

Our strategy positioned the photos as memory aids, to help participants think about their perceptions of engagement projects over the course of the semester. The images also served as jumping-off points, for deeper insight into their experiences during the study. More than that, for participants whose voices often are not heard, or are inhibited or shy, the images became evidence for them to speak authoritatively to researchers, and to each other, about the meaning that they derived from their work.

The ranking questions (#1 and #2) led us to quite a bit of unexpected data: participants had fascinating reasons for valuing photos in different ways and even took the opportunity to tell us about photos they *wish* they would have taken. For us, some of the most surprising discussions were of the images not taken because of a dead phone, a shot that was gone in the blink of an eye, or forgetfulness. These revealed just as much useful data as the photos that were present.

Finally, after all the data was collected, we began coding the photos, along with the other textual and discursive data collected throughout the study. We identified emergent themes, and also the threads of information that attended to our original research questions. Though we discovered a wealth of complex information overall, some of the most crucial findings arose from what participants valued during the collaborative projects. We found that community partners put a lot of emphasis on student expertise and that they highly valued students as innovators. One of the key reasons that community partners chose to participate in engagement work with the university was to gain access to students'

ideas, not merely to have extra help on the work that community organizations were already doing, as we had originally suspected based on the current literature.

We also unearthed some tensions between student objectives and instructor goals. While many of the students in this study outwardly focused on the end goals—the final deliverables they would turn in—as being the most important work of these projects, they also took several pictures of work as a process, such as images of group work and screenshots of text messages discussing the projects. This tension is revealing because writing instructors strive to communicate the importance of the writing process, but teacher lore tells us that students really only value the end product. Clearly, though, the line between how process and product are valued remains blurry for students. Additionally, we found that many instructor participants appreciated the mutable nature of engagement projects, hoping it would help students experience the ways that projects emerge and fluctuate in real-world writing tasks. Partners valued this plasticity as well. However, students often struggled to navigate projects that were in flux, as opposed to traditional writing assignments which were outlined clearly on a static assignment sheet. The convergence of these themes gives us insight into some of the roadblocks that engagement projects face and into what different stakeholders value. By considering these diverse perspectives, we will be better equipped to design and implement engagement projects that successfully attend to the goals of all these groups.

DISCUSSION: TAKEAWAYS ON METHOD

Photovoice invites us to consider the roles of researchers and participants, and especially the interplay between these two roles in navigating research situations. Further, the method is particularly well-suited to community-based research, because such applications illuminate relationships between institutions and local communities. In addition to its value for interrogating the relationships implicit in research, this method is intuitive, allowing students of various levels to both conduct and engage in the research.

After completing two semesters of this photovoice study, we learned quite a bit about the value of the method, including its ability to illuminate previously hidden processes, the importance of supplementary data, and the value of building narratives through photos. As participants

arrange photos, they create narrative threads that bring to light perceptions of engagement work. The activity also helps participants to organize their thoughts and to communicate them in the group. Participants not only describe the photos they also take into account the contexts, histories, and relationships that surround and impact their understanding of the images.¹²

The act of taking pictures, beyond just how we use them to elicit focus group answers, is a meaning-making endeavor, and can reveal a great deal on its own. When texts are framed and presented as photos, it changes how we think about context and process. Photos might also focus on the mundane—what participants see as uninteresting or unimportant aspects of their experiences. But photos of everyday practices can be invaluable because they allow you to get a glimpse into the private and routine experiences of participants.

Further, asking participants to arrange their photos in various ways allows them to recognize a multitude of themes, insights, and narratives emerging from their images. Discussions during focus groups also help participants realize how their own understanding progresses over the course of the project, as they reflect on their reasoning behind including certain pictures in their collections. For example, although we expected mostly pictures of face-to-face meetings, several of our participants included screenshots of their writing and research practices. The inclusion of these photos suggested the importance of this often-invisible background work, and we were able to ask participants about the role of this work in the progression of the larger project.

We also learned that while the participant photographs are undoubtedly the cornerstone of a photovoice study, the images alone lack context, and the contexts are very important for understanding the larger implications of findings. Therefore, it is important to provide ample opportunities for participants to explain and reflect on their photos through the inclusion of written narratives, interviews, or focus groups.

Having multiple sources and kinds of data is particularly important when you are highlighting the opinions and voices of your participants. As we have noted, photovoice data is gathered locally from the ground up. This makes it useful when studying multiple, local perspectives

¹²Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain, and Alan Radley, "Photographs Never Taken During Photo-Production Projects," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 4, no. 4 (2007): 263–280.



Fig. 8.3 Students gather around a service dog-in-training. Pilot study photo, Erin Brock Carlson, 2015

instead of top-down approaches to knowledge making. People are able to document their lives and the problems in their environments to make arguments for change, rather than depending on outsiders or institutions to make decisions for their community. The photos can also highlight or uncover relationships between individuals, communities, and institutions. For example, Fig. 8.3 depicts classroom excitement surrounding an in-training service dog who was attending the class that day. Though this is a simple picture at first glance, it represents the partnership between the University and the Indiana Canine Assistant Network (ICAN). It also depicts the engagement work of the individual student, since the student focused on this work and his collaboration with the ICAN for his

own project. The image revealed not just a moment of joy, but to the researchers, it brought to light a valuable partnership between students, the campus, and the ICAN, for which many students volunteer.

Images are particularly persuasive evidence when arguing for the importance of social justice efforts and other initiatives to improve the quality of life for citizens.¹³ Images, in addition to being visually stimulating, can often evoke a great deal of emotion, through identification or association. Additionally, because we operate so often in digital, highly visual spaces, we perhaps respond more earnestly to visual evidence. Photovoice combines visual and textual data as evidence of lived perspectives on the world—perspectives that often resonate with others. As such, photovoice is well-positioned to work toward social and political reform.

Although photovoice is most often deployed when working inside communities that are local to researchers and is useful in gathering a community around a specific issue, this method is also useful if researchers do not have direct physical access to participants. For instance, if you are working with participants in distant locales or those who are geographically widespread, as is the case with research conducted in digital spaces and online, then photovoice is a good methodological choice. For example, the near-worldwide ubiquity of cell phones capable of taking photos means that researchers can use this method to engage participants from around the globe, including participants in the Global South, indigenous communities, and online spaces.

Because most people carry a phone and regularly take pictures, participants are often already experts in this data collection method. Participants know how to take photos, so the method positions them as user-experts and allows them to take the role of participant researchers. Most people are accustomed to sharing photos digitally, whether by SMS, social media, email, or storage platforms (both web-based and application-driven). Therefore, participants do not need extensive training in the collection method. Additionally, participants can collect data at their leisure, with minimum effort or time investment, resulting in low start-up costs for researchers. Again, these characteristics make photovoice an effective choice when working with communities that have little time and money to dedicate to participating in research.

¹³Heather Castleden and Theresa Garvin, "Modifying Photovoice for Community-Based Participatory Indigenous Research," *Social Science & Medicine* 66, no. 6 (2008): 1393–1405.

CONSTRAINTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Though relinquishing researcher control of data collection has many benefits, it is also important to consider the problems that may arise. Participants might interpret your prompts in a variety of ways, causing them to veer far from the original goals of your inquiry. At the other extreme, participants might be overly concerned with the expectations of researchers, which affects what pictures they take. Additionally, people will forget to take pictures, so sending reminders periodically is important. For example, even though we sent reminder emails every two weeks, we still had participants tell us, at the end of the semester, that they often forgot to take photos at key times during their project.

Because photovoice provides surprising and very diverse data, you likely will not know what you will get until you see what participants have generated. This makes creating coding strategies ahead of time difficult and requires a lot of time toward the end of a study rather than evenly distributed throughout it. This delay also means that the expectations researchers bring into the study may be challenged, even at the very end of a study; this requires a level of flexibility from researchers.

The method also raises some important ethical considerations. Photovoice is unique because it is inherently linked to social justice and to an ethics of representation that focuses on how marginalized people are represented by others. When using any research method, you must think about the overall power dynamics of your study, as well as more immediate issues like participant safety and data security.

Most research entails an imbalance of power between researchers and participants. Research can easily become a colonizing force if we, as “outsiders,” impose our worldview onto “insider” participants, especially when we do not value the knowledge of those whom we study. Wielding representations of others from an outsider position of power can become a kind of symbolic violence against already vulnerable or disenfranchised communities of people.

Because photovoice emerged out of health research—which has been a major driver of the codes that govern ethical research practices across disciplines—ethical considerations are embedded in the technique. It is grounded in “respect for autonomy, promotion of social justice, active promotion of good, and avoidance of harm.”¹⁴ Photovoice research

¹⁴Caroline C. Wang and Yanique A. Redwood-Jones, “Photovoice Ethics: Perspectives from Flint Photovoice,” *Health Education & Behavior* 28, no. 5 (2001): 560–572.

should focus on ways that communities can use these photos as evidence to enact and change policies, and have the power to participate in their own governance. As a researcher, you are asking those who are normally acted upon to make narratives, tell stories, and voice concerns about the world around them. Because participatory action research (PAR) also involves voicing concerns to governing bodies, photovoice and PAR paired together can empower people to incite action and change on issues related directly to their lived reality.

Photovoice invites participants to challenge external representations of their lives and communities, upsetting the traditional research process that positions researchers as the authorities on interpretation. Participants are not seen as *subjects* (or, perhaps in some cases, *objects*), but as active coresearchers that collect and interpret data from their own perspective. This lowers the chances of researchers inadvertently or carelessly misrepresenting the knowledge work of participant communities.

It is also important to consider that participants, especially in vulnerable groups, might take and discuss photos in the way they think *you* want them to, rather than in the way that *they* want to. People often conform to our expectations of them, especially in research situations. As a result, it is crucial that you consider ways to move participants out of this mindset. Otherwise, you may end up with homogenous sets of images, which fail to capture the nuances and complexities of everyday life—which is the most interesting data of all.

With any research that involves human experience, participant privacy is always a top concern; it is especially sensitive when we ask people to bring us snapshots of their intimate, daily lives. Because this method asks participants to take photos on their personal devices, and often to transfer them digitally to a research repository, data security should be a top priority. We have to consider not only physical privacy and safety, but also data privacy because it could affect participants' online identities and personas.

Consider the following tips to ensure that your participants' data are secure:

- Submit your research protocol through your university's IRB before beginning the study, and include plans for secure data transfer and storage.
- Choose a secure repository to which participants can send or upload their photos from their phone. Focus on storage

platforms that make photo transfer as secure and easy as possible for participant-researchers.

- De-identify your data as quickly as possible by separating personal or identifiable information, like names, from the data; pay attention to all metadata attached to files and photos, which are the elements in the file information that are obscured unless you purposefully look for them.
- Depending on the nature of the data, do not ask participants to send data through email, social media, or any avenue where their data can be easily traced back to them or their online personas.

You must examine your specific participant population when considering all the various issues of privacy and safety. Protecting digital identities should be a concern of all studies, particularly studies that work with online communities or digital data collection and storage. Additionally, because of the emancipatory nature of this method, photovoice studies often focus on vulnerable and disenfranchised populations, as well as on sensitive and private situations. We cannot stress enough that safety and privacy must always be the highest priority, especially when working with these groups.

It is also important that you train participants to value the privacy of other people before they begin collecting data. Instruct coresearchers to avoid taking pictures with people's faces in them, or pictures of private places, such as nonparticipants' homes. The very thing that makes data collection easy—pictures of participants' situated experiences—means that photos are often of private lives. There are laws protecting intrusion into private space and the use of people's likenesses, even in public. You must consider how to deal with participant-generated images that contain the faces of nonparticipants and how to guard against privacy intrusions, especially when research will be shared through official channels like scholarly journals or shared informally without the consent of the subjects in participants' photos.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

In the realm of qualitative research techniques, photovoice is a relatively young method. Therefore, the nuances of procedural steps and applications continue to develop, as more and more researchers employ photovoice in diverse fields to answer various types of research questions.

As you begin to work with this method, you might find other ways to reimagine or tweak protocols in light of your own research questions and participant populations.

Since photovoice is a method that places a great deal of power in participants' hands, it is imperative to consider the needs of your participants in order to design your study so that it complements their everyday practices. Attention to this value will ultimately provide you with the highest amount of participation and the most authentic data. The role of mobile technology in this practice opens up avenues to pursue research questions and participants even when you are physically distant from your participants, further expanding the realm of possibilities for this method.

Photovoice is closely related to ethnographic and autoethnographic methods because it offers participants the opportunity to depict experiences on their own terms. This method requires researchers to really think about the role of the participant in research studies by considering how they approach the study, what power they hold in the study, and what effects they have on the course of the research.

This method is flexible enough to use for a variety of different research situations. We contend that photovoice is best suited for participatory research, which positions participant knowledge and experience as integral to understanding both the questions that we pose and the answers to those questions. We are situated in a net of ideologies that influence our worldviews and our research; we always enter research projects with preconceived ideas of their outcomes. We can never truly step outside of our own perspectives. This is also true for our participants. However, if, instead of feigning objectivity, we can open a space for a multiplicity of voices in this kind of qualitative research, it may help us find richer meaning in the complexities of everyday life.

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