

Photovoice as a Teaching Tool: Learning by Doing with Visual Methods

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There has been a lack of research done on in-class teaching and learning using visual methods. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate an enriched teaching and learning experience, facilitated by a Photovoice project, in an Advanced Methodology class where sociology graduate students were exposed to various social research methods and methodologies. Students were asked to take photographs that would represent a research interest or a lived experience based in their own social world. The article weaves four students and the professor's experiences to document the impact the Photovoice project had on each of them. Through this process, it was found that Photovoice is a successful tool for conducting research, teaching students to think critically, and introducing students to a new medium to create knowledge. Students experienced what it is like to be a researcher and a participant in a qualitative research project and discovered the overwhelming potential visual methods have to inform society about lived experiences.

Increasingly, qualitative researchers have embraced visual methods, including photography, as a means to create knowledge and convey understanding (Gibbs, Friese, & Mangabeira, 2002; Pink, Kurti & Afonso, 2004). However, there has been little discussion about the ways in which students and other researchers might begin to learn about the instructional uses of photography. Visual methods have tremendous potential both inside and outside of the classroom. However, without discussion of pedagogical uses, the potential of these methods for furthering understanding of various social issues may not be recognized, even though scholars such as Harrison (2002) state that visual imagery can give strong insight into "wider cultural perceptions, categories, and metaphors, and provide us with views of how things are or should be" (p. 857). Our work, shared in this article, represents one example of the ways in which visual imagery can be used to enhance learning experiences.

Bagley and Cancienne (2002) write of "voices of imagery" (p. 126), which is an appropriate way to describe our unique work with photography that bridges some of the gaps between teaching, learning, and research in the context of visual methods. This article features a compilation of voices and imagery resulting from a Photovoice project in a research methods course at the University of Saskatchewan, in Canada. Wang (1999) defines Photovoice as a "process which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (p. 185). It enables participants to share their stories by taking photographs and involves selecting images that most accurately reflect the issues, explaining what the photographs mean, and identifying theories, issues and themes that appear (Wang, 2005). It is often used in community-based participatory research projects and employed with the intentions of 1) empowering those

who are silenced, and 2) promoting social change (Wang, 2005) in areas such as health (Carlson, Engebretson & Chamberlain, 2006), Indigenous studies (Castleden, Garvin & Huu-ay-aht First Nations, 2008; Moffit & Vollman, 2004), women's issues (Frohmann, 2005), and economically and ethnically diverse groups of people (Radley, Hodgetts & Cullen, 2005).

The course, entitled Advanced Methodology, is taken for fulfillment of graduate degrees in the Department of Sociology. In 2007, the class included several assignments and labs that encouraged students to learn qualitative research techniques and to experience being a researcher "in the field." The instructor, Dr. Roanne Thomas-MacLean, assigned a photography lab based on the Photovoice concept developed by Wang and Burris (1997). The focus of the assignment, through the application of photography, data analysis, and knowledge dissemination, was not only to foster and enhance research skills but also to provide insight about issues relevant to qualitative research, including an awareness of social issues (Carlson, Engebretson & Chamberlain, 2006), the links between the researcher and the researched (Shah, 2006; Snelling, 2005), and the self-reflective and interpretive nature of qualitative social science methods (Creswell, 2003; Mason, 2002).

We have brought together voices that describe this visual assignment, which utilized photography as a way to attach imagery to lived experiences. This work details an exceptional teaching and learning experience for students and the instructor. As students in the class, participating in this assignment not only gave us unique insight into our social lives but also presented us with an opportunity to explore ideas and create our own meaning by applying our knowledge and actively engaging in the learning process. It was a positive learning experience in which we could begin to explore

researcher and participant dynamics in sociological, visual, and qualitative methods. The inclusion of visual methods as a learning tool in the classroom proved to be very powerful. As for the instructor, it was the first time she developed collaborative relationships with students more akin to a research team rather than the student-teacher relationship. This is the only course resulting in a publication for all authors, whose history includes many years of undergraduate and graduate courses as students and well over ten years of university teaching for the instructor.

Although we discuss the process in more detail in the methodology section of this article, in summary, the class was introduced to Photovoice through presentations and journal articles utilizing the method. Each student was asked to create his or her own Photovoice project that incorporated ongoing research or conveyed a personal experience. Herein, we discuss the elements involved in the Photovoice assignment and focus on the benefits of this class project, which facilitated an immense learning experience for us compared to other classroom settings. We were able to view our world, as sociology students and as individuals, through a new lens, to develop as qualitative researchers, and to expand our understanding of meaning and knowledge. This article is essentially our “voices of imagery” (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002, p. 126) which were brought together in the context of our course.

Relevant Literature

Key ideas associated with sociological research and visual images provide the foundations for our work. The first issue discussed here is the use of visual images in sociological research. We then highlight issues associated with teaching visual sociology in the classroom setting.

Visual Sociology in Research Methods

A multidisciplinary review of the literature shows that there has been an evolution of visual research over time. Some forms were already being employed in the early nineteenth century (Banks, 1998), and changing technologies and influential researchers have continued to expand the understanding and use of visual research: Mead and Bateson’s (1942) anthropological research is regarded as highly influential; Garfinkel’s (1967) work in ethnomethodology established the basis for expanding visual research to other disciplines; Collier and Collier (1986) closely examined the use of photography in ethnographic fieldwork; and Becker’s sociological work (1974) was important in establishing the connection between photography and social research (in Riley & Manias, 2003). However, despite

the development of visual research and the rich history of photography in anthropology (Cheatwood, 1978), visual methods have only played a minor role in social research (Riley & Manias, 2003).

Existing literature makes it clear that there are a variety of ways images can be used in research: as documentation; in analysis; as a catalyst to create knowledge and develop understanding; to track data; and as data themselves (see Glover-Graf, 2000; Killion, 2001; Riley & Manias, 2004; Samuels, 2004). Photography is a “powerful research tool” (Riley & Manias, 2003, p. 89), and while the various uses of images will depend on the focus and objectives of the research topic, there is the suggestion that it is possible to approach any image as sociological inquiry (Grady, 2001). Images have complex histories, including who produced them, who the intended audience is, and what they were used for, and “encode an enormous amount of information in a single display or representation” (Grady, 2001, p. 85). As Killion (2001) states, “A single photograph may contain a thousand references” (p. 50). In sociological inquiry, which explores the complexity and depth of significance of those things that often seem commonplace or mundane (Grady, 2001), questions are regularly asked that should uncover “fascinating, useful and important information even in seed catalogues” (p. 94). This implies that photographs of any kind can be highly useful for research, since they have the potential to stimulate ideas or raise questions when approached sociologically.

There are a variety of methods used to integrate photographs into sociology in order to conduct research and create knowledge. The choice to use photo novella, Photovoice, or photo elicitation, and the decision to have photographs taken by the researcher, a participant, or a professional, provide a number of options to explore research topics. Each will have different implications for the research and depend on the nature of the research focus. What the research question is, what type of information the researcher wants to gather, and what type of knowledge the researcher wants to produce are all issues that need to be taken into account when deciding how to incorporate photographs in research (Glover-Graf, 2000; Killion, 2001; Samuels, 2004; Goopy & Lloyd, 2005/2006; Farough, 2006). Another important element to consider when utilizing photographs in research is the interpretations of the photographs – how they are explained and how they are presented – because people will understand the images based on their own cultural knowledge (Killion, 2001).

The literature suggests that the value of photographs to sociological research, however they are used, lies in their ability to create and support meaning-making. Photographs are used to help focus responses to particular ideas, connect the world of the researcher and researched, create richer data, and act as a means to

help enhance memory (see Riley & Manias, 2004; Samuels, 2004; Goopy & Lloyd, 2005/2006; Farough, 2006), thereby eliciting understanding. For example, nursing students who used photographs to explain their conceptions of culture's effects on health were able to see gaps in knowledge, were exposed to their own biases, and were able "to see the world through the eyes of other persons, perhaps for the first time" (Killion, 2001, p. 53). The value of photographs in exploring understanding and creating new ideas is discussed in the literature, indicating its use in facilitating meaning making. As McAllister and Rowe (2003) state, "analytic skills [including interpretive and meaning-making skills] require a degree of playfulness, passionate engagement, and creativity" that often come from engaging in unique methods (p. 297).

Teaching Visual Sociology

The literature focusing on teaching visual sociology creates a picture of the complexity involved in incorporating the medium in the classroom. Grady (2001) suggests that many are uncertain about incorporating visual images because of a discomfort with camera technology and an unfamiliarity with ideas and conventions in art history and film criticism. Therefore, future visual researchers must develop skills in order to work with photographs, including developing an understanding of the mechanics of photography. The widespread use of cameras today may create the assumption that there is general comfort and experience with taking photographs, but professional photography skills are necessary to create a useful product that will help further sociological knowledge. Students and researchers need to step outside of the discipline of sociology in order to learn about photography technology, including types of cameras, equipment involved, and techniques used to take photographs (Cheatwood, 1978). In addition to knowing the equipment, it is also vital to know how to take photographs, to have the ability to see the world with a photographer's eye, and to become familiar with editing (Cheatwood, 1978; Grady, 2001).

Along with the mechanics of photography, it is essential to learn how to think with a critical eye. In order to make photography sociological, individuals must learn the broader connection of "visual conceptualization to the study of society" (Cheatwood, 1978, p. 388). In other words, students and researchers must be able to see the connections between photographs and sociological thought. At the same time, visual images can be used as a way to develop a critical or qualitative eye (McAllister & Rowe, 2003), or sociological imagination (Grady, 2001; Hanson, 2002). In addition to analyzing the images, researchers must also learn how to effectively present their research

and ideas. Therefore, teaching visual sociology should make students think about the most appropriate way to package their product, how to present the images to their audience, and how to link those images to theories and ideas so they become clear to the audience (Cheatwood, 1978).

There is also some discussion in the current literature directed at the actual teaching of visual sociology in a classroom setting. The variety of uses of visual images and the various techniques used in research creates a range of options for the classroom setting (Grady, 2001), and a review of current literature indicates that there are opportunities to incorporate lessons in the classroom that encourage the growth of visual sociologists and qualitative researchers. Sociologically analyzing images in the classroom is a common suggestion to help develop skills in visual sociology and qualitative research (for example, see Grady, 2001; McAllister & Rowe, 2003). Showing students images should also encourage their imaginations and stimulate their senses (McAllister & Rowe, 2003). Some literature presents the option of students generating knowledge in visual sociology by taking photographs themselves in order to create understandings of a particular subject or issue such as health (see Killion, 2001) or disability (see Glover-Graf, 2000). As Glover-Graf stated, "deep understandings are gained when students generate rather than repeat knowledge" (p. 287). Supporting students sharing their own work, as well as encouraging classroom discussions, are also techniques that are beneficial to instructors teaching visual sociologists and qualitative researchers. Looking at other people's work allows one to improve his or her own skills (Grady, 2001), discussion can impress in students the variety of perspectives that exist (Killion, 2001; McAllister & Rowe, 2003), and photographs can stimulate discussion and actually increase participation (Killion, 2001; Hanson, 2002).

Including visual images and visual research techniques in classroom instruction should increase the acceptance of and familiarity with visual sociology and support the growth of the discipline as its boundaries are stretched and its capabilities for knowledge creation are expanded. The visual image is one more tool to gain understanding of the social world. Exploring the possibilities of visual images and photography in sociology will produce new ways to learn and understand: "As studies show success in thinking and learning visually instead of or in addition to traditional lectures and verbal description, a shift in technique is required" (Stokes, 2002, p. 14). By incorporating visual sociology in the classroom, such as the case with this Photovoice assignment, instructors support students' growth in the discipline, encourage them to grow as researchers, and give them the opportunity to learn by doing.

Method

Eleven graduate students from a variety of disciplines were enrolled in this class. There were eight women and three men in the class, and the ages of the students varied: eight were 20 -30 years of age, two were between age 31-40, and one student was between ages 41-50. The instructor designed the course based on previous teaching experiences in the area of qualitative methods and sociology and provided students with opportunities to engage in hands-on exercises comparable to field research. Prior to beginning the assignment, students received assignment guidelines and ethics guidelines and viewed the work of a guest speaker who utilized Photovoice in her doctoral research. Students were asked to view the Photovoice website (www.photovoice.com), and reading materials pertaining to Photovoice were assigned, including the work of Carlson, Engebretson and Chamgerlain (2006), Goopy and Lloyd (2005/2006), and Samuels (2004). Students were also encouraged to pull from other course material that would further their ability to carry out the assignment. While all students had used digital cameras previously, none had completed any formal photography or digital camera training. Cameras were inexpensive models which are widely available, so no high end or professional photographers' cameras were used for the assignment.

The assignment required students to select a topic to explore, which could be related to current graduate research or another well-defined topic of interest. The students were invited to take as many photographs as they wished but were asked to choose four to eight of the most valuable to analyze and present. Students were free to determine the value of the photographs based on their own consideration, but assignment guidelines included suggestions such as choosing the photographs that most revealed the topic or were the most visually compelling. Following guidelines for the interpretation of photographic data and pulling from previous knowledge of sociological theories, themes and issues, each student was asked to analyze his or her photographs and share the images and their interpretations with the class in an eight to ten minute PowerPoint presentation. The presentations incorporated a brief explanation of each photograph in such a way as to explain the significance of the image – both its intended meaning and its sociological significance. The presentations had the mimetic quality of conference presentations with regards to time, theoretical background, theme, delivery, and post-presentation questions from peers. Each student also had to prepare a two to three page brief highlighting the project's design, method, and findings, which was submitted to the instructor.

The methodology noted above provides a general overview of the assignment and its intended outcomes. There was variation in topic, theoretical basis, research procedure, selection criteria, and process of analysis among the class because the assignment criteria presented certain freedoms that gave the students the opportunity to make decisions about the direction of their work. We, the first four contributing authors of this article, were students in the class and have each described our personal, unique account of the Photovoice project. Our photographs document key substantive areas in sociology – family, health, religion, and identity. Kara Schell portrays the changes her family experienced as her grandmother recovered from the aftermath of a stroke. Alana Ferguson's work depicts a few days in the life of a young mother with her newborn child and the challenges that this young woman faced. Rita Hamoline links her project to ongoing research into the effects of religious institutions on the health and everyday lives of women. Jennifer Shea explores the topic of Inter-Provincial migration, reflecting on her move from the shores of Newfoundland to the prairies of Saskatchewan. Following is Dr. Thomas-MacLean's reflections upon this assignment. We then recount the things we have learned from this hands-on classroom experience that instilled within us the value of images as a teaching tool, a research method, and a means to construct knowledge and create understanding.

The Lived Experience

Kara Schell. For this assignment, I decided to focus on my experiences within a family trying to adapt and manage after a grandmother suffered a stroke. It was an opportunity to understand the impact an individual's health condition has on a family, as everybody was involved in aiding her recovery, creating an environment that would work with her new limitations, and figuring out how to exist with the changes that had occurred. Before picking up a camera, I spent time brainstorming ideas about my own understanding of the situation and discussed experiences with family members, considering both the tangible impact in daily life and the more subjective thoughts and emotions. I then began taking pictures that would translate those ideas visually, capturing images of obvious physical implications caregiving had around the home (see Appendix A, Photograph 1), and images that presented or symbolized concerns, difficulties, and the emotional impact of the situation. I was able to encapsulate many themes and issues in the photographs. Two major sociological themes covered were health and the family, and I was able to cover issues of changing roles and responsibilities, dynamics in family relations, the physical presence

of caregiving, the impact on work and daily life, and the emotions involved. One example is a picture of a long, empty road surrounded by nothing but fields at dusk (see Appendix A, Photograph 2). It came about after a family member and I had both verbalized thoughts about how difficult and uncertain the path as a caregiver was. The picture represents a number of emotions that we had experienced throughout the process, such as feeling lost, not having a clear direction in it all, and trying to navigate alone along an empty path.

This assignment presented opportunities to engage in new experiences and develop a range of useful skills throughout the process. The act of taking photographs required creativity that does not often get a chance to surface in the classroom setting. Taking pictures with the purpose of conveying meaning allowed me to discover a new way of looking at the world, and there was much careful consideration needed at this stage of the assignment as I decided what I would photograph to represent ideas. When the photographs had been taken, I then had to consider how to present my ideas, which images to use, and how to convey the meaning I attached to each. At that point in the process, I spent much time thinking about the metaphors, symbolism, and layers of meaning that were situated in both the photographs and the issues that I was trying to present, and I also had to consider how others would understand the meanings I was conveying. To then apply my own experiences to sociological thought, I was required to link my photographs to broader sociological themes and consider the connections between my own experiences and bigger issues in society. I also had to decide how to best present my product to the class and consider how to clearly explain my ideas to a wider audience. Sharing my assignment with the class was a beneficial experience because it allowed me to develop skills necessary for presentations and gave me practice in that type of setting. In general, the whole process of this assignment was very beneficial to me as a student, a researcher, and as an individual. It shed light on a new type of medium to present ideas, and the project expanded my vocabulary by introducing me to the use of visual images as a way to convey and create meaning. I was able to apply knowledge – theoretical and practical – that I had learned in the classroom to the assignment, which is an opportunity not always presented, and most importantly, I was able to create meaning myself. This Photovoice project was one of the most instructive and stimulating assignments I have experienced as a student, and the opportunity to engage in such a challenging and rewarding process benefited me extensively.

Alana Ferguson. I took pictures with a young new mother who was facing many changes and challenges in her life. She chose which images would best reflect her experiences in her new role as a mom, and together we took fifteen photos inside her home and around the city in which we live. Her narrative flowed out as we looked at the photographs and discussed their significance. The use of images captured emotions and metaphors where words would not have been enough, so she was able to express to me her lived experiences in depth. I was able to connect two main sociological themes out of her Photovoice, one being the social stigma the healthcare system attaches to being young and having a baby. She described a picture of a hospital (see Appendix A, Photograph 3) as the beginning of many frustrations that resulted from being treated unfairly and being made to feel as if she was too young to have a baby. Other pictures were also taken to signify the stigmatisation from healthcare workers, but many photos were captured to represent experiences of caregiving and to make meaning out of being a mother. This second theme of caregiving reveals insights found in the perspective of both sociology of the family and sociology of religion. Family life was often a struggle with a husband who was taking full time classes and leaving her with a lot of responsibility. However, it was essential for her to acknowledge the support she did have in her life through a picture of a sign that said “Faith, Family, Friends.” (see Appendix A, Photograph 4). She felt that without these three things in her life she could not properly raise a child. Despite the rollercoaster of emotions and experiences she has had, she was thankful to be blessed with her baby girl and viewed her as a gift from God.

The process of working closely with this participant in such a creative way allowed me to personally experience the importance of visual methods in qualitative research. This project facilitated an immense personal learning opportunity that I can recognize on three main levels. First, invaluable research skills were presented to me in working with Photovoice around the exploration of participant-researcher dynamics. Having experienced the role of researcher in working with this young mother greatly helped me with my Master’s thesis. I was able to learn what researchers and participants go through together in participatory research projects; it truly is a joint endeavour, and often the methodical process is equally as important as the findings. The second learning opportunity was through the exposure to connecting visual images to lived experiences or social realities. Pictures really do speak volumes of words, and in this case, the photographs told stories. I was able to see firsthand the power of Photovoice as a technique to capture detailed narrative about incidents and emotions in life and then connect those to the social world around

us. The third level of learning for me came with presenting this project to the class. It gave me brilliant insight into how difficult it is to choose which aspects of research projects to present, how important it is to be true to a participant's words but still offer your own interpretation, and how much of an impact Photovoice projects can have on other researchers. I related to others in the class through having undergone a similar research experience and also through seeing the emotional connectivity classmates had within their own Photovoice projects. This was an amazing assignment to prepare myself for future qualitative projects. I am thankful to have been given this in-class opportunity to expand as a researcher, but I am also thankful to have learned a lot about myself as a person.

Rita Hamoline. This assignment allowed me to face, examine, and define issues that arose from a public conflict that was intimately connected to a personal experience. I drew from sociological concepts emerging from feminist, conflict, social control and social constructionist theories. I incorporated knowledge gained from the sociology of health, religion, medical sociology, ethnic, and gender relations that informed the premise for my Master's thesis. In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), C. Wright Mills wrote that "urgent public issues and insistent human troubles" (p. 21) are inexorably connected. The public and the private cannot be disassociated. Feminists have long used the phrase "the personal is political," and I found that this assignment allowed me, with the use of a sociological imagination, to center my thoughts on what the project would reveal.

Keeping C. Wright Mills' theories in mind regarding the interconnections between public issues and private problems, I set out on a cool and gray February morning to find locations and situations that would help me link my Master of Arts research to the Photovoice assignment. I took approximately 50 photographs that focused on the potential for personal conflict and social identity fragmentation in the lives of Roman Catholic women who try to balance the choice between secular contraceptive technologies and faithfulness to rigid Catholic health mandates for women regarding birth control, sexuality and personal agency. The public struggle for women's autonomy regarding reproductive choices and historical efforts to control women's rights through regulation of their private sexuality by the Catholic Church fits Mills' proposed links between the public and the private.

My class presentation and report for the assignment juxtaposed images of Mary as the eternal and sacrosanct Virgin against Eve as the eternal and consummate sinner. The photos noted in this article illustrate the power of Photovoice concepts and techniques to help graduate students explore the creativity of using photography in qualitative research

techniques for knowledge creation and dissemination. I fashioned a mini-narrative, or a visual metaphor, to capture the contrast between images of traditional expectations of female behaviour in the Catholic Church (see Appendix A, Photograph 5) and women's reality of making and living out choices in their everyday lives in a contemporary world. As a student, I made meaningful connections in my research between abstract theory and real life applicability that helped me to focus my thoughts and create a template for future work. The old picture, with its worn and faded print removed from the fragile frame, is recast against a white cloth (see Appendix A, Photograph 6). The composition of the photograph suggests a disconnect between tradition and reality, and the white cloth is a contrast between the whiteness of purity to which all Catholic women are to aspire and the white shroud of death that symbolizes an absence of opportunities to engage in meaningful debate around Catholic women's identities as publicly faithful women and private arbiters of personal autonomy.

Jennifer Shea. For my Photovoice assignment, I focused on my recent move and adjustment to Saskatchewan from Newfoundland. Two key sociological themes were incorporated: Inter-Provincial migration and cultural adjustment. As a Newfoundlander, migration and the acculturation to new cultures has always been of interest to me given the high out-migration rates experienced by my birth province. As Finnie (1999) argues, movement within Canada enhances diversity through the blending of provincial cultures and our knowledge of these. In thinking through this project, I referred to Marshall and Foster's (2002) work in which they applied Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to highlight "the fields of interaction between two distinctive cultures" (p.64). *Habitus* refers to individual's agency, as exercised through existing social conventions, rules, and so on. While Newfoundland and Saskatchewan are unique in their cultural backgrounds, I was also drawn to identifying the cultural similarities that are shared by the two. This assignment provided me the opportunity to further reflect on the sociological issues and my social experiences of enculturation in moving to a new province.

The pictures I took for this assignment were taken on a cold, dull Sunday in late February of 2007. I drove through the city seeking images that would reflect my thoughts and experiences of a new cultural and social setting. Throughout my drive in the city, I observed what was different or unique during my adjustment to a new community, comparing these visual images to what I had left behind in Newfoundland. I chose to divide my pictures in three predefined themes: architecture, nature (see Appendix A, Photograph 7), and animals. In my final analysis I chose the most compelling, personal

images to include for the in-class presentation and my assignment write-up. During the presentation, I shared my narrative and explained my thematic analysis of the eight images I selected to discuss. A photo of a granary is one example of an image that was captured, taken just outside of the city of Saskatoon, to highlight my theme of architecture (see Appendix, Photograph 8). Prior to my move to the province of Saskatchewan, I had never seen a granary. For me the granary represents a quiet beauty, as well as a shift in economies. Coming from a fishing dependent province, I grew up surrounded by the ocean and was used to seeing boats and water. Having family members engaged in the fishing livelihood, I recognized that farming holds the same importance and is as entrenched in Saskatchewan's culture as fishing is in Newfoundland. Although the two industries are very different, this observed commonality between the two provinces offered me a sense of comfort and connection with the home I left behind.

This assignment meant a great deal to me both personally and academically. Personally this project gave me the opportunity to reflect upon my move out west, what it meant to me, and what I left behind. Academically it provided me with an extremely valuable learning experience. Through the hands-on application of the assignment, I felt immersed in this qualitative method. I feel that I have gained knowledge and understanding which would have been impossible to achieve from just completing related readings. This assignment allowed me to understand roles and experiences of both the researcher and participant. In my experiences as a participant, I reflected upon my future role as a researcher. This project enabled me to understand how participants may respond to me as a researcher when I carry out my future research. I thought about how they may feel in regards to the use of this method and the topic that we will explore together. This assignment and my reflection of both roles will benefit my future research incorporating Photovoice, as I now feel more knowledgeable about the method and the meanings and experiences attached to its application.

Dr. Roanne Thomas-MacLean: Notes from the instructor. My previous qualitative courses incorporated assignments and activities that provide students with opportunities to develop understandings of methods through close approximation of what happens in the field. For example, my classes have utilized mock focus group discussions and interviews. This course represented the first use of an assignment utilizing visual methods, prompted by its growing prominence in qualitative research and based on my own research of Aboriginal women's experiences with breast cancer utilizing Photovoice (Thomas-MacLean, Poudrier, & Brooks, 2008). Its growing popularity

makes it essential for students to acquire the necessary skills to use the method in data collection and analysis. I was quite apprehensive about the process, but the class in which students shared their photos was the most profound classroom experience I have had in about ten years of teaching, as demonstrated in this article. In fact, while students in other classes produced "journal-quality" papers, this was the first teaching-learning experience that lent itself to the actual production of a manuscript and ongoing collaboration. I believe it was the nature of Photovoice and the immediacy of the immersion into one another's work that helped to facilitate the collaborative process between the co-authors of this article. However, our intent in producing this article has been to promote the use of visual methods in teaching and learning, and it is in the spirit of this intent that I offer some ideas about the benefits and challenges of using photography in the classroom along with some pragmatic suggestions for those who might wish to incorporate visual methods in their own courses.

After completing the assignment, I asked the students to share what they saw as the benefits of this assignment. Students liked the fact that they were asked to do something creative, that they had freedom to explore whatever subjects they chose, and that they had the opportunity to share their work with their classmates. The sharing of the work was vital to the assignment as it allowed students to see critical thinking in action as each of them presented their work and their rationale for taking certain photos. These elements of sharing interpretations and ideas as they occurred may be unique to photographs. Students could immediately see and begin to interpret the "data" or photos of others. This made the Photovoice assignment quite different from others such as mock interviews, which provided opportunities for skill development but did not allow students to see and hear thought processes in action. Photos provided immediate feedback to the student-presenter but also reminded students that there is a level of interpretation that occurs when research findings are read, interpretations that are well beyond the control of the researcher. Thus, students felt the assignment helped develop aspects of critical thinking, both as a collective group and individually. In reflecting upon photos to be taken and selecting photos to be shared, students were allowed to branch off into new areas, to bring their research topics into focus, or to understand their interests more deeply. The photos required a level of reflection that exceeded what conventionally occurs when students get to know a topic through a literature review and provided detailed perspectives on a variety of substantive areas within sociology, including family, religion, gender, and place/space. In short, the use of Photovoice provided unique learning opportunities for me and for the students.

Challenges associated with this assignment were very much centered upon dilemmas faced regularly by qualitative researchers. Students said they had to work to envision pictures that could capture experience but that they also began to appreciate the complexities of qualitative methods, both for participants and researchers. While such work has been common to other assignments (i.e., interviews), working with photographs seemed to require more awareness of the skills involved with interpreting data. For instance, some students said that the selection process was challenging. Interestingly, this challenge could also be viewed as a benefit if considered part of the development of critical thought. Other challenges were associated with the personal nature of photography and with balancing personal involvement and work. This aspect of the assignment provided students with some firsthand experience in reflexivity, a concept that does not as readily emerge from an experiential point of view with respect to interview and focus group facilitation and analysis. The students' challenges were therefore directly connected to the benefits of the project, thereby illustrating the opportunities for critical and analytical thinking provided by Photovoice.

More pragmatically, from an instructor's point of view, there are a series of challenges that must be addressed if using visual methods in the classroom. First, all of the students in the class had access to digital cameras. While disposable cameras have been used in Photovoice research, and they are quite accessible, they are not always reliable. If visual methods are to be embraced, institutions will likely have to support such work through the establishment of qualitative research centers. A second, related challenge associated with this work is that Photovoice is at a nascent stage. Students may not have a clear understanding of the importance of visual methods and their potential use for understanding social issues. While preparation for this assignment involved a guest speaker, articles, a handout, and class discussions, it is possible that more information about Photovoice could have been beneficial.

Discussion

While emphasis in the article is on the value of this Photovoice assignment from a sociological perspective, our own experiences reveal the compelling potential of incorporating Photovoice as a teaching and learning tool into other disciplines such as social work, nursing, education, and medicine. It presented to us a new way of understanding the world, it was a challenging and creative way to encourage critical thinking skills, and the hands-on nature of the project allowed us to learn and apply practical research skills, which are all lessons that can be of use to other disciplines. The assignment

benefited us in a variety of ways, and as a result we were able to learn not only as sociology students but also as qualitative researchers and as individuals.

Our experience of Photovoice gave us valuable hands-on research experience, which was extremely valuable to our graduate research and our following work in academic and professional fields. It was incredibly instructive to learn by doing, and we not only gained experience specific to the Photovoice process as we went through the steps to complete the assignment, but we also learned more broadly as researchers. The assignment was open-ended in a number of ways, which required us to make choices that would impact how our assignments were completed. This was similar to those decisions made as a research project is planned and carried out, and exposure to that process benefited each of us as we were beginning to engage in our graduate research. The whole of the project gave us a new level of understanding of the complexities involved in a research process because we were able to learn by doing. This Photovoice assignment also developed our presentation skills, as we were challenged to decide how to package the project, how to present the images, and how to convey to the audience the connection of the photographs to theories and ideas. The opportunity to create a presentation allowed us to understand the importance of translating knowledge effectively, and presenting our research helped us acquire more skills and experience to prepare us for conferences and other academic and professional presentations.

We also filled various roles in the research, therefore experiencing the project from the points of view of both researcher and participant. As participants, we were asked to share our stories or ideas and portray experiences in photographs. This was useful as it allowed us to understand the time, thought, and oftentimes self-disclosure we as researchers ask of participants. The lesson informed, and continues to impact, the relationships with our own participants, as we appreciate the vulnerability and generosity of those who are involved in our work. As researchers, we were responsible for analyzing those personal stories and subjective ideas in order to connect them to broader ideas within the discipline. We experienced the great responsibility of constructing academic themes and ideas to share publicly from very personal, private stories, which provided us with a greater appreciation of the intricacies of qualitative research.

Engaging in the assignment also allowed us to grow more specifically as qualitative researchers, which again benefited us academically and professionally. The assignment allowed us to learn and apply technical skills of qualitative research such as creating a research focus, selecting which photographs to use as data, and

analyzing images to create meaning. Because of the complex nature of qualitative data, we were engaged in critical thought throughout the assignment in order to create and present ideas that were meaningful, credible, and authentic, which we understood more fully after engaging in the process ourselves. In addition, there are other skills valuable to qualitative research, including compassion, passion, integrity, tolerance of ambiguity, and the willingness to play with ideas (McAllister & Rowe, 2003, p. 296). Experiencing the perspectives of the participant and the researcher in this project allowed us to recognize the importance of these skills in qualitative research and informed our understanding of researcher-participant relations.

In addition to developing research skills both specific to Photovoice and more generally as qualitative researchers, this assignment also presented the use of visual images as a legitimate and valuable way to construct knowledge and create understanding about the surrounding world. Using photographs to convey meaning in an academic setting opened our eyes to a new way to approach issues, which presented us with another outlet to explore sociological issues. We were able to use Photovoice to focus on key areas within the discipline, such as family, health, religion, and identity, and it allowed us to construct and express meaning about themes using a new and creative tool. The addition of this method in research expands our ability to express ideas and convey meaning.

Another valuable component of this Photovoice assignment involves the critical thinking it promoted throughout the process. We were charged with generating our own knowledge, and applying this creative approach sociologically required thought as we developed our research focus, decided how to express ideas in photographs, chose which pictures to present, applied sociological analysis to those images, and presented them to the class. The freedom we each had to make decisions about our assignments created much variation in the process of taking photographs, the selection of images, the analysis of the data and connection to themes, and the theories that directed our understandings. We were all expected to apply our previous sociological training to the assignment in order to make meaning and develop connections between images and themes, affirming that the history of sociological theory is not only “a repository of illuminating insights, but that quality of mind we prize and try and develop in our students, the sociological imagination, is, at its simplest, an alert consciousness poised for insight” (Grady, 2001, p. 97). The sociological imagination developed through years of undergraduate and graduate schooling was spurred on by the creativity demanded by this assignment,

and it led to layers of meaning and depth of understanding. We also learned from others by sharing our photographs and their meaning and sociological themes. It was useful to see the various perspectives that were constructed out of the same assignment; every classmate had a unique way of carrying out the project, of choosing various themes and ideas to focus on, and of capturing certain images to convey ideas, which served as a reminder that each individual has a unique way of seeing the world.

Through our engagement with this project, our personal understandings of various social issues expanded, our critical thinking and research skills grew, and our understanding of photographic methods emerged. We were able to see the benefits and strengths of combining imagery and social theory within a class setting and, by extension, a larger dedicated social research agenda.

Conclusions

In the context of teaching and learning sociology, we have demonstrated immense learning experiences that can be translated into other disciplines. Individually this project facilitated visual insight into our own social lives, challenged us to think and see the world in a new way, and brought invaluable research experience through our engagement in the process and involvement as both participant and researcher. We have shared the value of a creative qualitative research method and suggest that its application in the classroom setting would have benefits beyond sociology. As demonstrated by our individual stories, each of us had a profound learning experience because of this assignment, and as a result we have grown as researchers, as sociologists, and as individuals. In this assignment we were able to capture our experiences through photos and then present them to the class, where we could reflect and learn from others' experiences as well. Our “modes of thought” as researchers were enhanced through learning practical research skills. Also, our values and “structures of feeling” were deeply reflected on and made meaning out of by choosing a personal social experience to capture and present visually. With the advent of new technologies, it is clear that visual images will only become more prevalent and accessible. Our work shows the importance of engaging with visual methods as teachers and as students. We strongly encourage other instructors to experiment with Photovoice and other visual techniques to encourage critical thinking, enhance social learning, and expand our ideas of how we can create knowledge and convey understanding.

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Appendix A



Photograph 1



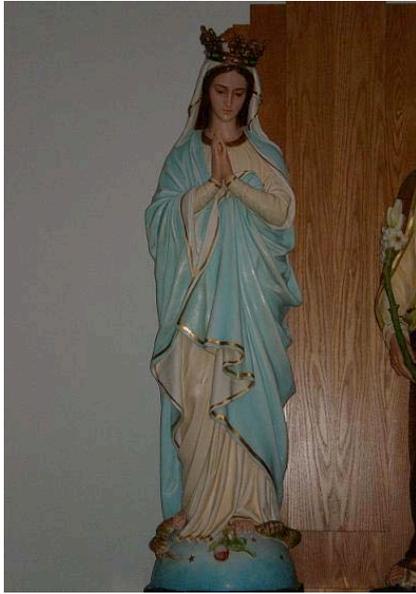
Photograph 2



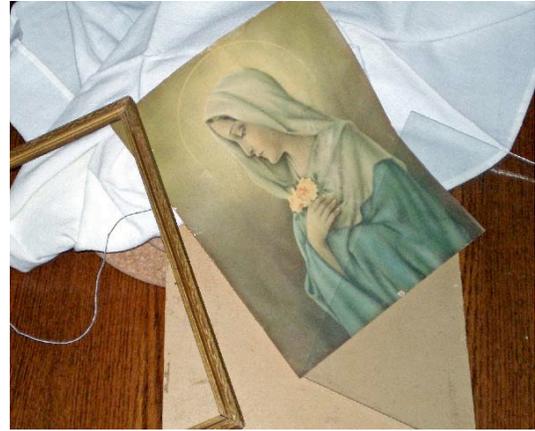
Photograph 3



Photograph 4



Photograph 5



Photograph 6



Photograph 7



Photograph 8