

Chapter 22

Understanding Students' Perspectives as Learners through Photovoice

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore photography as a participatory research tool that facilitates the interactions of participants and researchers as co-researchers to effect change. They illustrate this discussion with a study examining the perspectives of teacher education students regarding teaching practices and institutional structures. Photography offered participants a way to document experiences, and it became a community-based methodology that elicited narratives from the “participant as photographer” and the community of investigators.

INTRODUCTION

Walk across any college campus and you are likely to see students talking on cell phones, snapping photos to post on Facebook and Instagram, and checking their emails. For these students, the world has certainly become digitized, and they take advantage of the many opportunities to communicate with one another through text and visual images via SMS and cyberspace. These familiar tools are also appearing in university classrooms,

with applications designed to support learning in courses, maintain contact with lecturers, or access online materials.

As teacher educators, we want to take advantage of familiar technologies so that we can develop more culturally responsive pedagogies for learners who have been historically marginalized. In the years since democracy in South Africa, access to university education remains difficult for many Black South African students. For those students who enrol, particularly in historically White

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institutions, the academic majors they choose to pursue may be limited and it is not uncommon for students to “end up” in education as their course of study. We want to understand the life experiences of Black students at the University of Pretoria so that we can provide more culturally relevant approaches to curriculum that respect them as learners and allow them to become successful educators.

In this chapter, we examine the use of photography as a tool for sharing perspectives among teacher education students working with us as co-researchers to effect change in teaching practices and institutional structures. We first examine photography as a means of documenting experiences. Then we discuss photovoice as a community-based participant research methodology that utilizes participants' photographed images to elicit narratives from the photographer and the community of investigators. Finally we present the photovoice project we conducted with the students, discussing the perils and promise of using photography to empower students to create change within the academic community in which they live.

BACKGROUND

Documentary Photography

Visual methods document and re-present the social world in ways that allow others to see and understand in new ways (Coronel & Rodriguez, 2013). Photography has long been a tool in anthropology, geography, and health research. It has emerged as a powerful tool in documenting student learning and behaviour within and outside of school contexts (Abramson, n.d.; Rinaldi, 2006). Photographs in particular set off a “chain reaction” that causes people to remember, reflect, and gain new perspectives (Banks, 2001). Photographs taken by students for the purpose of engaging those with significant power (the teachers) with those who typically have

less power (the students) becomes the vehicle to initiate change in relationships (Wang, 2006). In our work, the use of cameras provided students with a familiar tool to examine the assets and barriers “where students are and which way they are heading” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 34) in an attempt to support their ongoing development as university students.

Schulze (2007) indicates that, theoretically, reflexive photography is embedded in the theory of symbolic interactionism, a sociological perspective that places emphasis on micro-scale social interaction. Blumer (1969) was the first to use the term *symbolic interactionism* and set out three basic premises on which it is based. First, humans act toward things on the basis of meanings they ascribe to those things. Second, the meanings of such things are derived from, or arise out of, the social interactions that one has with others and society. Finally, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. Thus, symbolic interactionists investigate the meanings which individuals ascribe to symbols and things through, and as a consequence of, their social interactions. Reflexive photography gives participants the opportunity to literally “zoom in” on these symbols, and elicit rich descriptions of the meanings attached to those symbols (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001).

In the context of our study, the three basic premises of symbolic interactionism can be explained as follows:

1. Black South African student teachers photographed certain symbols or artefacts that they identified with education based on a personal connotation and meaning that they associate with those specific objects.
2. The explanation of the above-mentioned symbols or artefacts stemmed from the connection that the student teachers had with various individuals or the community.

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