Photovoice in the age of COVID: Exploring social realities in the world around us

Application for SPSSI Teaching Award
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Description
I teach an advanced course in Social Psychology. The focus of the class is to examine aspects of social change through a systems lens, meaning that we explore “wicked problems” that are fundamental to health, mental health and healthy communities. At the same time, we explore both “big” and “small” attempts in tackling wicked problems, using case studies and considering the benefits and challenges of each. Finally, I ask students to document the change that *they* want to see in the world. Documenting aspirational change has taken various forms over the years, but this year I assigned a Photovoice assignment as a final project.

I’ve used Photovoice previously as a tool in the classroom to connect students with the truly wicked problems we all live with, including racism, inadequate affordable housing, and immigration challenges. Photovoice is a qualitative visual method (described below) that transfers power to people in documenting their own social realities, and gives them the ability to communicate them using a series of photographs that they take and curate.

When COVID-19 became a part of everyone’s collective realities in the spring of this year, the assignment was already planned, however the conditions were vastly different. The students were tasked with taking photographs of things in need of change in their local community. The class then shared their photographs with classmates and myself. Student presenters fielded questions about reasons for choosing the photograph they presented, messages they’d like to communicate, and ideas they had about what we could do about it. It turned out to be (I’m told by students) a refreshing way to engage in online learning while the world was rapidly changing, and allowed students the autonomy to document real issues and hardships they (or their communities) were experiencing. They articulated their issues through the lens of a camera phone, sharing them with an audience (the class) in hopes of sparking dialogue for what social change might look like in a post-COVID world.

Purpose
The purpose of Photovoice is threefold. It fosters critical thinking, enhances presentation skills and uniquely bridges gaps between teaching, learning, and advocacy using a visual method. Wang (1999) defines Photovoice as a “process which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (p. 185). Used by Wang and Burris (1994) as a qualitative method to cross cultural and translation boundaries with vulnerable communities, Photovoice has become a valid research and teaching method. Given

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the ubiquitous nature of cameras and camera phones, Photovoice enables a wide range of participants and constituents (e.g., students, community members) to identify problems (that may eventually become research questions) on their own terms. They are able to share and tell stories by taking photographs that reflect an issue, explain what the photograph means and how it relates to that issue, and engage in a dialogue about related theories and potential ways of addressing the issue.

Given its collaborative design, Photovoice is often used in community-based participatory research with the intention of amplifying marginalized or silent voices and promoting social change. Through the process of curating their own photographs and developing a presentation, students engage multiple critical thinking skills, while learning how to disseminate information to an audience in a way that can foster additional research, prompt feedback and reflection, and/or advocate for resources (in the case of presenting a policy issue to policymakers).

**Resource**
The 2020 Photovoice Project was an out-of-class exercise in which students used visual technology (i.e., camera phones) to take photos of a “wicked problem” that was in need of changing. Although the original project was designed to capture issues on and around campus, the range was expanded to places around the world as students transitioned to online learning from home.

Students were encouraged to take several photos but choose one to present, and discuss both the issue and the change they would like to see (in an oral presentation). Before completing the assignment, students read several academic articles about the use of Photovoice in participatory research (including Wang & Burris, 1994) and I gave a lecture using my own research to provide example case studies. Instructions provided to students included a description of what to do, such as explaining that photography is a powerful universal language, that can be used as a research and learning tool. I included the following prompt: “I’d like to better understand your day-to-day experiences living on campus AND/OR in your local community – what are some features of this community that need improvement? What could make it better? This project is designed to capture aspects of this place that may be in need of change – that could include anything physical, social, emotional, political, or lifestyle-related...”

I also included specific things to avoid, such as taking photos of people without their permission. The purpose, I explained, was to choose a photograph as a starting point for a conversation. The students were given two weeks to take photos and develop a presentation. Again, due to the timing of this assignment (during March 2020), the Photovoice project quickly became a medium for documenting and voicing frustrations about the handling of COVID-19. Students shared photos that ranged from dealing with social isolation-induced anxiety and depression to eviction notice postings to international students sharing photos of mandatory quarantining in their home countries (a change that could benefit the U.S.). Overall, I was extremely pleased with the final projects. I learned more about my students in the process, and they expressed to me that they enjoyed this assignment as part of the class. Students learned about a qualitative research tool through actually doing it; a hands-on approach that was a win-win all around.