Using PhotoVoice as a Teaching Tool in the Adobe Connect Classroom

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This case study:
* Discusses the use of PhotoVoice to teach human development in the Adobe Connect classroom.
* Reviews steps to scaffolding student knowledge related to the theory and implementation of a PhotoVoice project.
* Shares how students used visual imagery and captioning individually and in a group to deepen their understanding of gender and sexuality

> ### Teaching and Learning Goal
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> I chose PhotoVoice for this project in order to help students grapple with understanding constructs of gender and sexuality not just by reading articles, but also by engaging their visual analytic and discussion skills. PhotoVoice is a participatory action form of ethical photography that weaves together self-advocacy and community participation as an agent of change, particularly for those with identities that have been historically and socially excluded. Wang and Burris (1997) developed the methodology based on the concept that people can best represent their own realities and tell their own stories as a method of empowering those who often do not hold a lot of social capital or power related to stigma and/or marginalized identities.
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> This activity was designed to both encourage students to think about their own positionality, and to deepen understanding of how constructs of sexuality and gender are embedded and expressed within one's community throughout the developmental life span in both asynchronous and synchronous formats.

Activity and Results

For me, it was important to have PhotoVoice assignments embedded throughout the entire course. Students participated in brief pre-course theoretical readings about PhotoVoice and I also wrote up a 'brief' about the goals and objectives of the semester's PhotoVoice projects. Students were also assessed through a brief survey about their exposure and knowledge of PhotoVoice prior to starting the course. For each week of all 6 weeks, students were asked to complete a visual reflection log which included a required 2 photos, captions and a brief written reflection. These helped me understand how seriously students were taking the assignments and to see how they were understanding the class material. The activity then culminated in the final week of the class in which the 'PhotoVoice exhibition' takes place, and students presented two images culled from their semester's work along with captions and facilitated discussion with their peers. Data was gathered between 2019-2021 in three separate course iterations, and students who participated in the assignment evaluation survey reported that this assignment both deepened their experience with the course's constructs and was a perfect fit for synchronous online learning. One student wrote, "I really enjoyed seeing the final visual journals of my fellow students. It helped to personalize the course material in a powerful way. It is often a challenge to feel connected in online classes, and this format created connection that I don't normally see". ~

Graduate Student, 2020. As the instructor, I really saw how much students enjoyed this format, and our final synchronous session had great energy and student engagement as they presented their images.

Technical Details and Steps

Throughout the course, it is important to convey to students the theoretical underpinnings of PhotoVoice, which include understanding all aspects of participation, action, research and social change for social justice. This information should be scaffolded throughout the course design, with readings early in the course that describe the use of PhotoVoice in different studies as they relate to the lifespan, and sharing in live sessions any excerpts of PhotoVoice exhibits. Photovoice.org is a good place to start with basic information for students.

Step One:

In the initial course module, it is important to spend some time explaining the theory behind PhotoVoice, as well as to give a brief history of how it was developed. Even if you're not familiar with PhotoVoice, this is something any instructor can add to the course. It is important to clarify that PhotoVoice is more than handing someone a camera and asking them to take pictures. There are five key concepts at the foundation of PhotoVoice, as defined by Wang (1999), include the idea that images teach, that pictures can influence policy changes, that community members should be participants in both the creation of and the definition of images that shape positive public policy related to health, that plans should be embedded in the project to involve policy makes and other influential stakeholders as an audience to the images and that there are both individual and community levels.

Another early conversation should cover the topic of ethics in photography. Students should be prepared to have a consent form signed by anyone whose image is captured, or to be prepared to edit and blur out the faces or identifying information in any images that are shown. Smartphones make this process very simple, and it is important to check with students to make sure they have access to some form of capturing digital images such as a smartphone, tablet or digital camera. Students can also use Poloroid or analog photography, but it should not be replaced by sketching, drawing or collaging. It is also important to emphasize that the photos should be taken by the student, as opposed to downloaded off the internet, or used from other sources. This question came up in every section of the class I taught, and it is important that students have ownership and use the lens of their camera to express themselves. If the images include content that may be upsetting to viewers in the class, or if the final class session is opened up to others, a general content warning should be shared at the beginning of the session.

Step Two:

Assigning images should also start out as 'low-stakes' assignments so that students get more comfortable with the assignment as the semester progresses. For example, the language for Visual Journal I is as follows:

For your visual journaling exercise, you will be asked to choose images and to write an explanatory paragraph. Please only write 1 paragraph per image.

1. Choose an image that reflects a 'favorite' something of yours.

2. Choose an image that reflects your identity as a social worker.

3. Choose an item that represents your identity as a student.

4. Take a picture of something that conveys the idea of inclusion.

5. Take a picture of something that conveys the idea of exclusion.

For each image, please give reasoning for your selection (3-5 sentences for each image).

Step Three:

Each week, instructors may increase the complexity of the image chosen, and/or expand the depth of the reflection. In the Adobe Connect classroom throughout the semester, students can meet in breakout groups to discuss their process, their images, or the weekly assignment. Similarly, students may meet in breakout groups prior to the final session to go through the final culling process in which they choose from all their images to discuss the final two images to share in the exhibition.

Step Four:

For the final assignment, there should be both an asynchronous and synchronous component to reinforce the learning objectives. For this HBSE course, students first completed their Final Reflection Journal, which was due before the live session:

Assignment Text:

Please choose two images that you have taken this semester. These images WILL be shared with the entire class in our Live Session this week. Please email these images along with their captions in a single Powerpoint slide to the Instructor 48 hours before class time, and be prepared to discuss them in a panel format.

1. Choose an image that represents the evolution of your relationship with the course material.

2. Choose an image that represents questions you have left about the course material.

3. Please caption both of these images.

4. Please submit a brief paragraph describing your relationship to these images and how you selected them.

In the synchronous course session, it is important that students be assigned a presentation slot so that photo slides can be pre-uploaded into a prescribed order to be shared with the class. Prior to the synchronous session, the instructor should gather all the individual slides into one Powerpoint presentation. Students should present individually or in dyads, in order to ensure that the images can be shown in their entirety. As students come up on mic and camera, their images and captions should be broadcast as they describe the images and the process of selecting them. Chat should be monitored for questions for the presenter and for any follow-up discussion.

What this looked like in Adobe Connect

Image 1: This screen grab demonstrates an example of the final PhotoVoice presentation. Both photos on the slide were captured by the author in the Spring of 2022. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 1 Alt-Text: The presenter is featured in a small video pod on the far left side, with an Attendees pod below that. The bottom third of the room is a chat pod that shares brief directives for the presenter, including the amount of time for the presentation. There are three chat comments from Dr. C (she/her). The first says "Welcome to our last class session!" The second says "During the presentation, please hold off on active chat until each presenter has shared their images and captions." The third says "As a reminder, each person will come up on mic and camera and will have 2 minutes to share the 2 images they've chosen that describe their journey with the course materials this semester." The primary focus of this screen grab is the single PowerPoint slide which features the two chosen images being presented, the two captions the presenter has chosen for them, and the presenter's name. The text on the slide says "Student: Beth Counselman-Carpenter" at the top. As a note, this is not an actual student, but rather the author. The first image on the slide is a double rainbow, and below that the text reads "The starting point…." The second image is a blur of colorful squiggles, and below that the text reads "The 'end'…." A stagelight timer is featured on the far right-hand side of the screen.
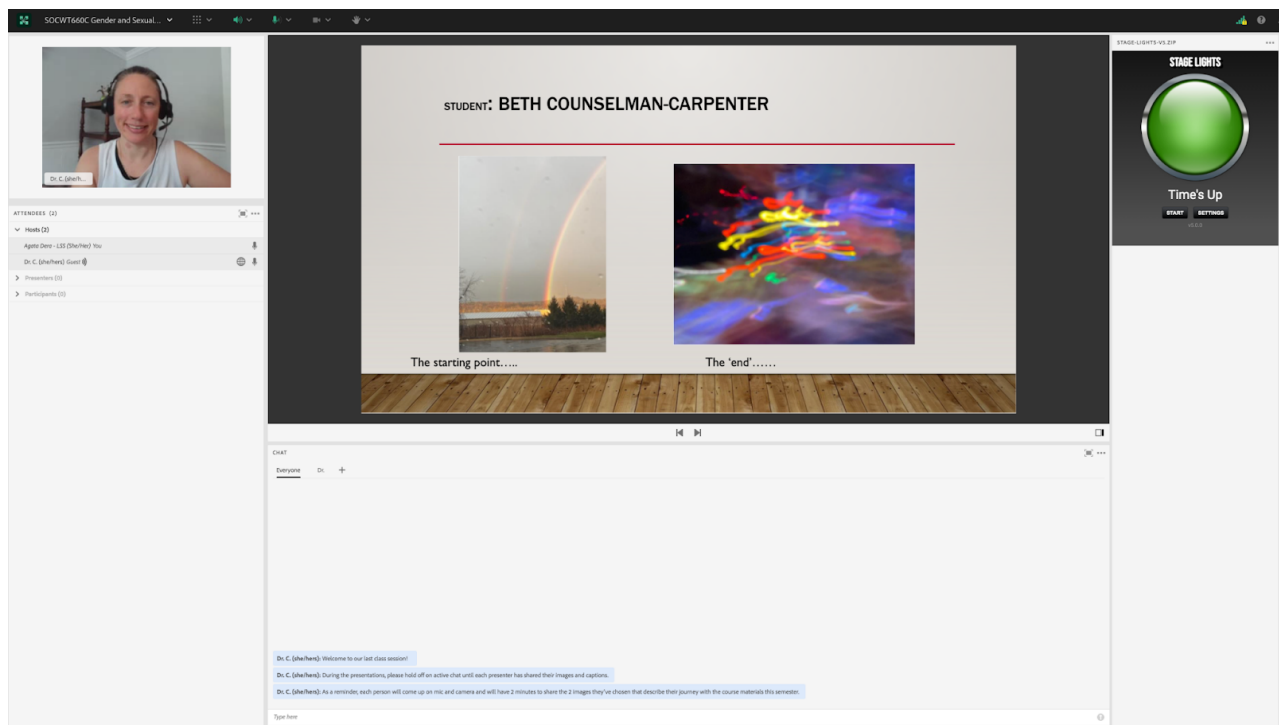
Acknowledgements

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Beth Counselman-Carpenter, PhD, LCSW, RPT-S is an Associate Professor of Social Work at Adelphi University. Her practice and research interests include understanding the role of post-traumatic growth in decreasing barriers to service provision in social work and medical settings, particularly with the LGBTQIA+ community; online learning pedagogy and mental health service provision for breast cancer survivors. She has co-authored two books: 'Working with Grief, & Traumatic Loss: Theory, Practice, Personal Reflection' & 'Self-care for Clinicians and Decolonizing Human Behavior: An Anti-Oppressive Reader' and frequently contributes to peer reviewed journals. In addition to teaching, she maintains a small private practice and community DEI consultancy practice. Beth has a BA in Sociology from the University of Richmond, an MSW from New York University and a PhD from Adelphi University.