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Tips for Using Photovoice in Evaluation of Extension Programs

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Abstract

Photovoice is a technique in which a facilitator guides a participant to produce a photograph and accompanying caption that reflects the participant's unique views regarding a topic. The photovoice process is designed to be used with a wide range of audiences. This article describes ways Extension educators can incorporate photovoice into the evaluation of Extension programs and identifies issues they should consider when doing so.

Keywords: photovoice, evaluation, participatory, photo

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Introduction

Photovoice is a participatory action research process that allows participants to use pictures to convey their stories (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photographs, combined with written and spoken language, are a powerful communication tool that allows for more richness and depth than traditional survey methods (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participatory approaches such as photovoice have been noted for their ability to help Extension educators address topics in an egalitarian manner across a variety of target audiences and content areas (Tritz, 2014).

How Photovoice Works

In a photovoice project, a facilitator provides a prompt or topic for participants to address in photos they take. Once participants have taken photos that reflect their experience of the prompt or topic, the facilitator guides them through a process to help them add captioning to communicate the meaning behind one or more of the pictures they took. Frequently used for this process is the SHOWeD model of questioning (Wang et al., 2004):

- S—What do we SEE in the photo?

- H—What is really HAPPENING?

- O—How does the story relate to OUR lives?

- W—WHY does this problem or strength exist? What are the root causes?

- E—How might we become EMPOWERED to improve the problem?

- D—What can we DO about it?

The answers to these questions can become the photo captions themselves, or they can be used to help participants develop more refined captions for their photos. The combination of photo and caption convey the perspective of the participant. Photovoice projects are frequently displayed in public or at a community event, often as a call to change or action. Additional information about designing and implementing a photovoice project is available in guidance from Latz (2017).

How Photovoice Can Be Incorporated Into Evaluation

We have found photovoice to be effective as a technique for program evaluation. Photovoice can be used for a variety of evaluative processes within Extension.

Formative and Process Evaluation

Photovoice can be used to address a number of formative and process evaluation questions. Some of these are as follows:

- What issues do members of the community see as challenges to address?

- How does a particular segment within a community experience a phenomenon? What are unique opportunities for Extension to assist?

- What are the contexts in which community members will apply the concepts they learn through Extension?

- As participants are engaged in our programs, what clues can we learn from their pictures about the content that is most salient to them?

- What new knowledge or skills gained in a program have participants applied at home, in their businesses, or on their farms?

Summative Evaluation—Evaluating Outcomes and Impact

In situations where photovoice is incorporated as a program activity, participant photos and captions are artifacts that can be analyzed for understanding or demonstration of program content. Photovoice projects also can be conducted after participation in a program to document ways program participants implemented program content in their practices. This was a strategy used by Mott et al. (2017) in the evaluation of an AgrAbility project. Another project involved using photovoice in a "pre-post" design to document changes over 6 years of a community health initiative (Kramer et al., 2013).

In addition to questions centered on participants' experience of program outcomes, additional questions to be asked include these:

- Was a photovoice project successful in engaging community stakeholders in a photo display? What additional community conversations or efforts were of interest?

- Did others in attendance, beyond the photovoice project participants, have similar experiences? How can this information be used to move forward?

In these examples, the photovoice project also can serve as baseline data for subsequent initiatives.

Benefits

The benefits of using photovoice are wide ranging. The technique

- provides an opportunity for members of marginalized or underrepresented groups to have a voice,

- helps others understand lived experiences,

- allows participants to interact with others who may have similar experiences,

- removes literacy barriers,

- gives participants the power to choose whether or not to disclose differences,

- provides opportunities for growth through reflection,

- offers participants an opportunity to be heard and understood by people or organizations they might not encounter in everyday life,

- provides participants with an avenue to advocate for resources, and

- allows participants to advocate for policy change.

Considerations

The elements and issues listed below must be carefully considered when pursuing an evaluative photovoice project. Many such considerations involve offering opportunities to empower youths or volunteers, incorporate leadership development, and cultivate community partnerships.

- **Equipment and Materials.** Equipment is required to take photos (e.g., cell phone or camera), and a way to display them, such as printed media or audiovisual equipment, is needed.

- **Personnel.** Personnel time is required to accomplish the tasks of organizing and facilitating sessions, assisting with caption writing, and arranging logistics for public displays of participant work. The amount of time required is likely to be greater when working with youths or audiences with literacy challenges.

- **Ethical Issues.** Facilitators must be careful to allow participants' viewpoints to be reflected in their work rather than impose their own words. It is also imperative to have clear communication about expectations regarding data ownership. These projects often require trust between participants and facilitators, especially when working with vulnerable populations.

- **Defined Protocol.** It is easy to tailor the design of the photovoice project. It is helpful to use a consistent protocol throughout a project that is implemented across multiple sites.

- **Inclusivity.** It is important to appropriately adapt photovoice processes and activities to be accessible and culturally inclusive.

- **Stakeholder Expectations and Indicators of Success.** What do stakeholders (including participants) view as success? What do they hope to accomplish through participating in the process? Asking these questions leads to conversations that are informative for evaluating group goals and expectations.

- **Management of Team Differences.** The photovoice process is designed to elicit a variety of participant viewpoints and experiences, which can generate powerful discussions.

Conclusion

Photovoice is a useful tool to consider when evaluating a program because it can be used in a variety of ways. Extension educators can use photovoice to conduct a needs assessment, document a program's process or progress, or elicit community reaction to a program. The captioned photos are artifacts that can serve as baseline data for future efforts in the community. Although there are several considerations for Extension educators to deliberate, photovoice offers many benefits, especially in work with underrepresented audiences.

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