

Photovoice: A Focus on Dialogue, Young People, Peace and Change

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Abstract: This paper explores how dialogue was introduced by the author through a model of praxis called 'Young People Peace and Change.' It was developed through community-based research, and further supported by evidence from school-based youth work, with young people in two cities in England. The paper focuses on the role of dialogue as part of Photovoice, linked to the duality of our praxis to provoke consciousness and action. It is an exciting and innovative theory-driven approach that actively seeks to help young people identify, understand and transform pressing issues and challenges of peace in their everyday lives. The work emerges from the belief that part of the solution to young people and violence is embedded in their common concerns and aspirations for peace, which can be elicited by bringing them safely into dialogue. Furthermore, the project seeks to cultivate real change by helping young people to 'speak' and self-advocate through a range of methodologies including photography, photo-elicitation and public engagement, to inform youth serving systems. 'Young People Peace and Change' has been awarded and recognised for successfully engaging a significantly vulnerable community of young people (including those at risk of violence). It has great potential for replicability and wider implications for practitioners, students, policy makers and research.

Keywords: Dialogue, Photovoice, Youth work, Young people, Circle process, Everyday peace

Introduction

Young People Peace and Change (YPPC) is shaped by dialogue, Photovoice, and a common interest in a better society. The methodology works directly with young people who are marginalised, socially excluded, and overlooked, including those at risk of becoming involved in violence, such as knife crime. Participants are asked to share, and critically reflect on, photographs they have taken, to examine issues of peace they may face in their lives. The process actively moves from individual to collective understanding, supporting young people to think, dialogue, exchange, and work together, to promote their concerns and aspirations for peace. It is commonly recognised that young people have a right, and a need, to learn about peace. Less emphasis is given to how young people actually understand and experience peace, especially in situations in which peace may seem hidden in the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life. In this context, YPPC is a form of participatory action research, drawing heavily from a Freirean dialogue-based approach to critically engage with

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questions of peace in young people's everyday life. The paper highlights what has been learnt about 'aminating' dialogue in circles, building trust, and an epistemological awareness of dialogue – both 'as' knowledge for action, and 'in' knowledge for action in the world. Key questions that frame the chapter include, 'How does dialogue provide intersecting and disruptive spaces of pedagogy, research and practice such as youth work?' And, more specifically, 'How can dialogue support a pedagogic hope and applied practice for peace with young people, especially those who are vulnerable, at risk, socially excluded, unheard, and overlooked?'

YPPC is a form of participatory action research (Kindon et al. 2007; Glassman and Erdem 2014) that combines a mixed methods approach. I am very tempted to refer to it as 'Dialogic Photovoice,' although the term is tautological. This is because there is real need to understand and emphasise the significance of dialogue in Photovoice, which has not necessarily been highlighted in prior literature. Photovoice has been widely used and reviewed (Delgado 2015; Sanon, et al. 2014; Catalani and Minkler 2010; Hergenrath et al. 2009). Photovoice is a visual research methodology that builds on Freire's pedagogy. Its origins are attributed to the feminist theory of Wang and Burris, (1994, 1997) who pioneered the method with marginalised women in rural China.

The three main goals of Photovoice are:

- To enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns.
- To promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs.
- To reach policymakers. (Wang and Burris 1997, 369).

Within YPPC, young people are asked to take photographs that represent peace in their everyday life. These images are then used to inform interviews and stimulate group dialogue with a view to systematically generating knowledge, whilst reinforcing the viewpoint of those being researched. The method is heavily influenced by Freire's problem-posing dialogue, whereby dialogue is used as a mechanism for 'raising consciousness, vision, and transformative action' (Brandmeier 2011, 357).

It is important to note that, Freire (1972, 1974) explains violence as perpetuated through structures of oppression. He expresses this ontologically as any act that denies us our natural ability to reflect and act in the world. Freire posits that this diminishes our belief in our own agency, making us increasingly susceptible to oppression. YPPC fully adopts Freirean dialogue as a genealogy of resistance, achieved by raising critical consciousness from within the affected community (Ardizzone 2003; Bajaj 2015) –

who in this instance are young people.

In his early work, Freire used schematised images, such as photographs, drawings, posters, as a 'point of reference' (Freire 1974, 143). The idea is that when contextualised images transmit complicated ideas and experiences. In YPPC the photographs taken by young people offered applicable, tangible, immediate, and accessible forms of information. Their visual meaning was not negated by language and literacy. Asking young people to present their world as 'seen through their own eyes' helped them to experience validation of their own knowledge and expertise. In turn, this supported those who might be most 'influenced by the myth of their own ignorance' (Freire 1974, 109). Furthermore, when we interact with images, we use different parts of our brain than when engaging verbally or with text (Harper 2002). In YPPC, this enabled broader and freer thinking, including that which participants may be less conscious of. As such, the young people's photographs generally led 'to a new view of their social existence' (Harper 2002, 15). This is understood as 'breaking the frame' and offers something very useful to dialogue. As previously stated, the young people selected which of their photographs they wanted to discuss in interviews and groups with other participants. In keeping with Freirean philosophy, I facilitated these meeting places (Freire 1974) as actively collaborative and power sensitive. The aim was to open up dialogue for knowledge and critical consciousness, whereby, young people are encountered as 'experts' of their own social worlds (Young 1999) and as agents of social change.

It is cardinal to understand the relations of transformative dialogue are grown and 'cannot be forced' (Boise 2008, 177). The next section will highlight four key things that I have learned as part of YPPC.

What I learned

Circle containers

YPPC purposefully utilises circles as a given space, or container, for dialogue (Senge 1994). When considering a dialogic approach to peace using Photovoice, this remains consistent with Galtung's 'self-reinforcing peace cycles' (2009, 30), and the transformative 'culture circles' of Freire (1974, 42). Circles provide a great opportunity to move communication between individual and collective thinking. The space calls for a need to work with difference and collaborate with others. It is also stretched by the dynamics of social interaction. As observed by Lewis (2002, 4), 'From the beginning it is clear. Everyone has something to offer. There is true equality of opportunity in a circle. There is no back row, no alphabetical order, no strategic placement. Responsibility is shared.' The uniqueness of circles as spaces for communication and learning is compatible with Freire's assertion that we only move

towards our true humanity and transformative potential when groups are comprised of 'loving, humble, hopeful, trusting, critical' (1974, 42) relationships. The principles listed below, for the prescriptive nature of circles as containers, are common to the praxis of Freirean pedagogy, Photovoice, and youth work:

- 'Equality' 'Democracy' 'Inclusion' and 'Choice' by which no-one is encouraged to dominate the process.
- 'Safety' through freedom to (not) speak, and an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition.
- 'Respect' as non-violent action and empathic communication, including a lack of shaming or blaming.
- 'Positivity' and opportunities for 'Agency.' (adapted from Roffey and McCarthy 2013, 39).

During YPPC, circles were limited to groups of six young people to allow each participant to have a voice and be heard. Research and projects centred around dialogue can be lengthy. This is often typified by protracted communication, trust building, and reaching consensus about shared meaning, findings and actions (Strack et al. 2004; Delgado 2015). Smaller groups can make the process less taxing, and aid engagement and retention.

YPPC progressed through four phases each time the circles were established. This involved 'Opening/Check-In, Presentation of the Issue, Sharing/Discussion of the Issue, Closing' (Lewis 2002, 6). The process was supported by a set of open questions adapted from the 'SHOWeD' schedule, frequently used in Photovoice with young people (Strack et al. 2004; Johansen and Le 2012; Royce et al. 2006; Delgado 2015). Establishing routines of practice can help to develop trust and ease in the circle, especially for young people whose everyday lives might be 'anything but predictable and orderly' (Middleton 1998, 103). During each of the sessions, the significance of the circle remained constant. Furniture was moved to set up circles in rooms. Groups were asked to retain and tend their circle. After breakout activities, and breaks from the project, we always returned back to the circle. Even when sessions were disturbed by other young people or adult staff, the young people retained their circle. This became an important indication of ownership.

Building trust, building depth

When working with young people, it becomes apparent how quickly they determine who is trustworthy, relevant and relatable. This process becomes even sharper when young people have reason not to trust adults, such as young people who feel marginalised or misrepresented by adults. As part of its design, YPPC established a

number of interactive activities to encourage co-learning by which participants become more familiar with me (as the facilitator), each other, and the space of the container. Building trust and dialogue in circles is underscored by the intersectional influences of everyday life. These can include identity, culture, roles, personal attributes, associations, shared characteristics, and perceptions about power (Hollander 2004). I found that ongoing reflexivity, and the ability to read situations in the group, was essential, including sensing the nature, feel and flow of the nuances and subtleties of non-verbal communication. We all carry the unpredictabilities of everyday life when we enter into situations of dialogue. This also shapes how we communicate inside the container, that is, who feels able to speak, when, and how; and how consensus is reached.

It is both ethical and practical to discuss the purpose and demands of work with young people at the start of the projects. This is done in YPPC, while actively generating a sense of unity and purpose (Strack et al. 2004). To support this, group activities (such as icebreakers and role plays) are introduced early on. Early sessions focus on the mechanisms of using a camera and camera care; the ethics of photographing others; 'ways of seeing photographs' as a way to send messages 'about' and 'for' peace; and the implications of the participants' photographs being used as 'educational tools' for stakeholders, policymakers, professionals, and other young people, in the local community and beyond' (Wang and Burrell 1997, 379). Being engaging and interactive helps build rapport that settles into open and non-formal dialogue. Encouraging participants to recognise and hear their own voices, and those of each other, can be empowering, especially for those people who feel their voices are often unheard, silenced or muted. This requires that adults deliberately allow the container to be a young person's space, and not submit to the desire to fill silences, smooth awkwardness, or simply react to what is heard. Freire calls this listening from the heart and it is only possible when predicated by a deep trust in people's capabilities for knowledge and action. In YPPC, this means valuing and prioritising young people as valid producers of knowledge. It also means that young people 'used their own ways of speaking to articulate their shared understanding of how their world came to be like it was and how to act to change their future' (Ahmed and Rugut 2013, 25). This is the start of a commitment to horizontalised, rather than asymmetric, power dynamics by which facilitators actively strive to create a greater balance of power in the group. Evidence suggests when circles are participatory, non-judgemental, and sensitive to situated knowledge and power, they have an emergent potential to transform conflict in ways that are empathic, creative and non-violent (Bickmore 2011; Vaandering 2014). This has particular significance when we approach circle communication, both as a conduit and vehicle for peace.

Alternatively, it is clear that some groups will lack cohesion and struggle with listening

and staying focused. In YPPC, certain participants regularly spoke over each other, and others did not expect to be listened to. We explored this, including broader questions about the young people's shared commonalities of not being heard, understood or valued. It is vital to recognise the ongoing challenges presented by the visibility of communicating in circles. This can be daunting, especially for those young people who are not accustomed to speaking or being actively listened to. Not all participants will be comfortable or willing to share their true feelings and thoughts as part of the group process, especially with the additional effect of public scrutiny. Such factors make it essential for the principles of communicating in a circle to be modelled with young people, rather than assumed. Participants might have no experience of working together, and/or in ways that are characterised as dialogic or collaborative (Strack et al. 2004). Within YPPC, agreements about communicating in the circle were 'young-people-centred.' Instances of real conflicts in the groups, or experiences of being minoritised within schooling, and so on, were useful to demonstrate how conflicts escalate around incompatibilities based on our needs, feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Being open to conflict, and conflict-literate, can help strengthen mechanisms for dialogue by allowing consensus for a lived mutually respectful and safe(er) space.

Over the course of YPPC, participants were able to review and share how well they thought they had worked individually and collectively. They became visibly more relaxed with one another, and those seemingly lacking in confidence became more proactive and spoke more frequently. Further indications of trust were demonstrated by a tendency for participants in each group to disclose very personal events: for example, young people spoke openly about having Asperger's, being in care, their struggles with mental health, family breakdown, family members with drug dependency, siblings being imprisoned, experiences of sexist-racist-gendered-Islamophobic discrimination, being mugged, stabbed, targeted bullying, etc. Participants also said they felt able to 'reflect' and 'share sides of themselves' that are often misunderstood or ignored. Pastoral staff and learning mentors, who sat in for specific parts of the sessions, reported being struck by the open non-judgemental dialogue in the groups. It was recognised that nurtured trust and openness allowed young people to talk openly about their experiences, language, behaviour, and strategies for peace in their everyday life. In summary, I found that building trust not only contributes to dialogue, it is essential, especially for the type of dialogue (championed by Photovoice) that strives to move past and challenge the normalcy of how we see ourselves, others and society. This asks us to reframe the question, 'Will dialogue build trust?' and to consider instead, 'How does trust build dialogue?' It is telling that in YPPC, when I asked groups in schools, 'When did you last experience peace?', a consensus emerged by which they agreed, 'Right now, discussing our feelings and being allowed to express ourselves.'

Knowledge for action: wording peace with images

YPPC opened dialogue as ‘knowledge for action’ by asking participants to create points of reference for peace (as mentioned earlier) by wording peace as part of their everyday life. When sharing these verbally, the group could sense and hear the strength of the emotion expressed through certain ‘generative words’ (Freire 1976, 51). These were understood as expressions of what they were really concerned about and interested in. Young people’s drawings were then used as ‘codifications’ (Freire 1976, 51) to represent their situation with regard to peace. Dialogue helped them communicate and question their values, beliefs, socio-cultural positionality, and shared norms. This is understood as encouraging participants to think structurally (Chonody et al. 2013), whereby young people are asked to consider peace, and the knowledge of peace, in conjunction with power, as being systematically structured in their lives. This dialogue was later supported by photographs taken by young people to express and share how they understood generative themes of peace and its related issues. Over 572 photographs were taken by participants. They then selected which of their photographs they considered most significant for interviews and communication in circles. These photographs helped generate a sense of ‘pride and ownership’ (Strack et al. 2004, 52) and helped young people to convey their understanding of peace.

Open questions adapted from the ‘SHOWeD’ schedule (Shaffer 1983; Wang and Burris 1994) elicited knowledge about the stories and messages of the photographs, in addition to what was prioritised or might be excluded and hidden. When certain participants struggled to articulate the complexity of their experiences and ideas, their images helped them to structure, articulate, and often deepen their production of knowledge.

Fig 1. An example of participant photography and accompanying extract:



This picture reminds me of myself: hope, darkness, parts missing. There's hope in the light shining and darkness at the bottom. The darkness shows a lack of peace. It resembles sadness and anger. The light is hope, hoping for better and being happy. A peaceful feeling. (Ismail, aged 15)

This initial stage of the dialogue allowed a move from descriptive analysis to interpretive 'issues, themes, or theories' (Wang and Burris 1997, 380). Commonalities formed across the groups regarding what they learnt for peace from their families and significant others such as youth workers. Young people also started to thematically reconcile their unfamiliarity with peace language and explicit cultures of peace, with micro expressions of peace as something embedded in their lived experience. For example, findings highlight how young people understood peace negatively, as what to avoid, such as negative people, fighting, gangs; and structural violence such as discrimination, lack of freedom, and 'warmongering.' They also shared common narratives about prescriptive ways to think and act about and for positive peace. This was illustrated by a distinct and shared focus on ways to sustain social togetherness by being critically self-aware of how we understand difference, and approach our differences, in society. Finally, young people also identified a range of tactics that helped them to act for peace in their everyday life. This finding emerged strongly through dialogue, which helped young people to scrutinise their conscious relationship with particular structural barriers to peace in their daily lives; or what Galtung (2000) refers to as structural 'fault lines.' For example, the (British) politics of war, understood to be wilfully militaristic, discriminatory, hegemonic and adultist. Also, poor teacher-pupil relations are conceptualised structurally as inhumane and neglectful gateways to school exclusion and consequent gang-risk for young people.¹ Likewise, certain participants identified how their community environment perpetuated systemic cycles of gangs and gang-risk as socially destabilising. These examples of critical problem posing served to complicate and frustrate young people's concerns and aspirations for peace.

By identifying structural and cultural barriers to peace, young people gave themselves opportunities to think and act beyond certain limits which curtail their life (Freire 1974). It is indicative of a collective knowledge and critical conscious that accepts we can move away from internalised cultures of helplessness, hopeless, inertia, and inaction (Shudak and Avoseh 2015). Instead, our social worlds are known and experienced as constantly changing open systems. The realisation that our own agency, as community-based collaborative change, can bring hope for an alternative

1 In schools, it was agreed that the group dialogue about peace – and how it relates to issues of behaviour, schooling and achievement – can help to inform youth voice, pastoral care, and individual behaviour plans. Evidence from YPPC has also been used to explore and support collective strategies for behaviour with children.

reality is the key to what Freire (1974) advocates as liberating ourselves and others from oppression. This becomes apparent as knowledge in action.

Knowledge in action: peace praxis and self-representations

Wang et al. (2008) refer to the process of generating knowledge in action as 'contextualising.' They explain this as participants using their photography to 'identify the problem or the asset, critically discuss the roots of the situation, and develop strategies for changing the situation' (2008, 80). In research, this is understood as a participative methodology which can enable participants to have increased influence to explore and analyse their daily life and reach their own conclusions about community-based action (Kesby and Gwanza-Ottmoller 2007). Public engagement is quite common in Photovoice with young people (Cahill et al. 2008; Delago 2015; Johansen and Le 2014; Royce et al. 2006; Sanon et al. 2014; Strack et al. 2004; Walker and Early 2010). During YPPC, four groups of young people provoked discussion and advocated for change, in six different settings. Their public engagements were built from praxis and self-representations, through their own words and pictures, as consciousness and action. Their decisions to act were directly motivated by their knowledge, aspirations, and concerns for peace, and how it relates to other issues in their everyday lives. Such events illustrate young people's awareness of their own agency and positionality to use their voice as a 'resistance act' (Yilmaz 2013). This includes the power of voice as potentially transformative, in addition to constituting potential counter narratives to challenge discriminatory and misrepresenting ideologies of age, power and authority (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015). As part of 'knowledge in action,' participants were keen to continue opening dialogue as a way of 'speaking back' with the research (Cahill et al. 2008).

Young people's engagement took place in front of cameras and directly to attendees and audiences. This included senior managers, practitioners, teachers, mentors in youth-serving systems, parents, friends, and other young people. The young people's images and words were also shown through film to students, creatives, and members of the local community. Once in public, some young people were reticent to present their work, but clearly proud of their photography (Strack et al. 2004). This provided impetus and contributed to them making themselves available to answer questions. They were keen to share their understanding of peace. All groups hoped to influence the audience 'about what it means to be peaceful, and what peace is' from a young person's perspective. Furthermore, participants wanted attendees and audiences to reflect about peace and consider what action they might take for peace themselves. In summary, young people shared and presented directly in six different settings, to audiences of up to 26 attendees in events that lasted up to three and a half hours. They facilitated peace-themed activities, shared anecdotes and findings; and explained their concerns, aspirations, and learning. The young people called for wider levels of youth

participation regarding peace, including their willingness to raise awareness citywide about peace and how peace can present possibilities for youth work. Attendees were gathered to eat together and decorate a semi-permanent peace installation in a youth centre. Young people's photography was toured as exhibitions across college campuses. Other participants were instrumental in using music as part of a summer community event to disseminate messages and raise issues as 'alternative modes of engaging in dialogue' (Pruitt, 2008, 17). In all of these examples, the action of young people is clearly 'a political statement' about their reality and social change (Wang and Burris 1997).

Conclusion

By reflecting on a model of praxis for dialogue called Young People Peace and Change, this paper has highlighted the importance of philosophical and methodological considerations as part of how we approach dialogue generally, with a specific focus on dialogue within Photovoice. I have illustrated YPPC as an applied combination of communicating circles, building trust as group process, photo-elicitation as distinct from verbal and text communication, and an epistemological awareness of dialogue both 'as' and 'in' knowledge for action. It was not assumed that the conditions needed for dialogue would emerge naturally. They were actively (re)created, including the process of reflexivity. By experiencing peace through photography and dialogue, young people discovered they had a knowledge of peace that often exceeded their own expectations. A culture of questioning opened up their curiosity, and they wanted to talk about peace. They aimed to extend dialogue. This is partly due to the power of speaking out, and giving meaning to themselves, others, and how they see their social worlds, using their own words and voices. This generated an impetus of hope that was not necessarily evident at the start of the project. In conclusion, YPPC contributes to our knowledge about how young people understand peace, and firmly positions young people as valued protagonists (for peace) 'in the here and now' (Del Felice and Wisler 2007, 18). Like previous Photovoice projects, YPPC suggests certain beneficial learning for participants, involving an array of attributes and skills (Delgado 2015; Strack et al. 2004; Johansen and Le 2014; Chonody et al. 2013). Yet, some challenging questions remain.

Empowerment does not result from 'handing out cameras' and 'there is nothing intrinsically or automatically empowering about using pictures' (Pauwels 2015, 108). Wang et al. (1998) recognise that their research enabled participants to present their perspectives to those in power. However, it did not shift power from one group to another – or move the participants into positions of local decision-making. The same can be said of YPPC. This is further complicated by the fact that it is difficult to quantify the impact of Photovoice for the researched and their wider community. The intent and philosophical premise for social change is further complicated when

we consider praxis, dialogue and conscientisation as something that ‘can be done’ as an applied science; and if so, ‘what should be done’ and furthermore ‘who should do it?’ (Rapoport 1970, 280). It should be recognised that Photovoice places the burden of change on participants. As mentioned earlier, that this need not be experienced as ‘(youth) friendly’ due to challenges presented by dialogue, lengthy engagement, and participatory expectations. Such issues are very significant when working with groups who might be marginalised.

Dialogue requires an ontological and epistemological awareness.² Whether consciously or implicitly, our philosophical premise will shape how we value the knowledge of dialogue, as well as the knowledge created through dialogue. This is never neutral and is reinforced by how we see ourselves, others, and our social worlds. With regard to Photovoice, more attention is needed to determine the primary significance of dialogue. This includes a view that (transformative) dialogue is only as robust as the relationships that shape it. Photographs offer a useful mechanism to open up dialogue. However, Photovoice requires a sensitivity to critical engagement, reflexivity and reciprocity that allows each person involved to recognise their inherent praxis. This paper has shown that the use of communication in circles can provide a useful framework to think about how to contain dialogue (in Photovoice). It complements a philosophy about everyday space and processes that are power sensitive, horizontalising, participatory, and participant-centred. This can be developed further by the theory and practice of Galtung’s structural violence and strategies to move towards ‘peace ability’ (Röhrs 1994, 6) through critical anti-banking dialogues, such as those explored in critical peace pedagogy (Bajaj 2015).

In conclusion, this paper hopes to contribute towards an understanding of the ‘action’ potential of Photovoice (Sanon et al. 2014; Catalani and Minkler 2010). Photovoice calls for a congruence of (critical) theory and method for dialogue, and necessitates creativity in the container (Senge, et al. 1994) to mobilise both practitioners and young people – including vulnerable populations of young people at risk. It is an exciting and innovative approach designed to generate knowledge and enhance practice; and adds complexity to existing questions of dialogue, participatory action research, and critical peace pedagogy with young people.

2 In the case of YPPC, this is recognised as a particular theoretical framework influenced by the work of Stzompka (2008), Galtung (1969) and Freire (1974). When elaborated, this can be understood as a form of critical constructivism (Kincheloe 2008).

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