

2014

# Using PhotoVoice to empower K-12 teachers and students through authentic literacy engagements

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## Recommended Citation

Adams, Susan R. and Brooks, Kathryn, "Using PhotoVoice to empower K-12 teachers and students through authentic literacy engagements" (2014). *Scholarship and Professional Work – Education*. Paper 16.

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Using PhotoVoice to Empower K-12 Teachers and Students  
through Authentic Literacy Engagements

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A draft manuscript submitted for consideration in the

Special Topic Issue in

*Children's Writing: Perspectives on Teaching and Learning* (Winter 2014)

Sheryl V. Taylor, Ph.D., Editor

***Selected Submission Category: Reflections on Practice*** A mid-length referenced discussion of practices relating to the teaching and learning of writing by children

## Overview

PhotoVoice is a community and participatory action research method developed by Wang and Burris (1994). Rooted in grassroots empowerment education, critical feminist theory, and documentary photography, it aims to enable people with little money, power, or status to communicate needed changes to policymakers. Examples of PhotoVoice projects can be found in fields outside of education, focusing on a range of social issues including homelessness, physical ailments, mental and psychological illness, and gender discrimination. Only a handful of studies in the United States have demonstrated use of PhotoVoice with adolescents in out-of-school educational settings (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wilson, et al., 2007; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). Similarly, an organization called The Viewfinder Project ("The Viewfinder Project," 2010) uses methods that run parallel to PhotoVoice, and provides its curriculum to those who are interested in initiating a group project in their community. The current research focus on out-of-school use of PhotoVoice-like approaches creates a gap in the research regarding the *in-school* literacy development opportunities inherent in PhotoVoice methods. As knowledgeable and capable community ethnographers, K-12 students, particularly historically marginalized and disempowered student populations, can use photo images and PhotoVoice methods to create powerful, visual representations that identify and elevate the significance of the local social issues to transform existing conditions in their communities.

## Literature Review

PhotoVoice draws upon a critical feminist framework which provides a firm foundation for approaching youth participatory action research (YPAR) with historically marginalized youth. In YPAR projects, the Freirian (Freire, 2008) concept of praxis – critical reflection and action – is a central component for students in studying their social contexts. Feminist approaches to YPAR feature elements of critical pedagogy, but also historically have called specific attention to the voices of silenced or unheard women, to the social and historical construction of gender roles, and to dominant notions of sexuality and heteronormativity.

Several research studies have contributed to understanding how a critical feminist lens can inform YPAR. For example, educator Cathie Bell's (1996) project, *Gender Bias and the Middle School Experience*, examines gender issues within her school community. In response to student surveys in which female students admitted to being sexually harassed at school, but did not feel they had the power or the right to report it, the school decided to implement 'Girl Talk, a forum which allowed the participants to develop trust and to discuss sexual harassment and incidents of homosexuality and homophobia they had experienced or witnessed. The students raised awareness by posting signs with photos throughout the school protesting sexism, and signs to demonstrate "what makes girls angry about the way the world views them" (p. 25). These thought-provoking displays encouraged teachers to react more definitively to sexual slurs overheard in the hallways, and to revise the curriculum to provide more balanced, representative, and equitable materials. The participating girls stated that as a result of these changes, they encountered less resistance to reporting sexual harassment. Inspired by Girl Talk, a group of male students at the school also initiated their own survey to examine sexual harassment attitudes.

In addition, Wilson, Dasho, Martin, Wallerstein, Wang, and Minkler (2007) adopted PhotoVoice for use with a group of early adolescents in an after-school program called YES!, Youth Empowerment Strategies. Students were given cameras and invited to take pictures of their world as an impetus for critically analyzing the images' meanings and social

representations. After organizing their photos into categories of ‘assets’ and ‘issues’ in their community, written reflections accompanied each of the students’ selected photographs to describe their significance. One project, entitled “Writing on the Walls” featured photographs of derogatory bathroom graffiti, an issue that historically provoked numerous fights at school. One photograph displayed the message, “\_\_\_\_\_ is the ugliest gir in the school! (sic).” In response to these startling images, students first raised concerns about (dis)respecting others. Later a group wrote and performed a skit, “Fighting and Bathroom Wall Writing,” at school assemblies, resulting in the circulation of a petition. In response, the school district painted over the graffiti and installed a new, more secure door.

David Schaafsma (1998) drew from the thinking of feminist researcher Patti Lather (1991) to frame a YPAR project with students in an inner-city, middle-school summer writing program. Students conducted oral history interviews with community members as inspiration for writing *critical fiction* (Mariani, 1991), which involves “the interrogation of unitary narratives, the naming of manifold identities, the exploration of multiple subjectivities, and the incorporation of ambivalence and ambiguity as elements of resistance” (p. 12). One student, for example, used the information she had gathered from interviewing community activist, Rose Bell, who started a local volunteer service for unwed mothers. The student then interwove the factual aspects of Ms. Bell’s life into a realistic-fictional storyline about a pregnant teenager. Students also de-constructed and re-constructed stories using critical narratology (McLaren, 1993), a composition that “encourage[s] the oppressed to contest the stories that have been fabricated for them by ‘outsiders’ and to construct counterstories that give shape and direction to the practice of hope and the struggle for an emancipatory politics of everyday life” (p. 218). From a critical feminist perspective, the students’ stories, grounded in the traditional method of oral history collection, served as tools for community connections, personal empowerment and social activism.

While these aforementioned studies certainly lend guidance for the implementation of PhotoVoice in schools, particularly in after-school settings, there is a decided lack of research conducted on the impact of PhotoVoice in K-12 classrooms. With an eye toward future research possibilities, this reflection on practice discussion will feature narratives provided by K-12 teachers, many of whom utilized PhotoVoice to stimulate and support English language and literacy development for immigrant English language learners (ELLs).

## **Process**

In 2012, a group of 15 K-12 educators gathered to participate in a week-long summer intensive workshop hosted by Butler University, where Brooks and Adams (two of the authors of this manuscript) are professors of education. This PhotoVoice workshop was co-facilitated by Brooks and Greene, who is the third author on this manuscript. Workshop participants were invited to join a larger research study already in progress, were provided background information on the larger study, and signed informed consent forms indicating their willingness to be included in the study. This reflection on practice is a strand pulled out of the overarching study due to the rigorous engagement and continuing interest of the PhotoVoice participants. In alignment with Adams’ (2013) research on creating meaningful professional development for educators, the workshop participants were provided collegial and collaborative time and space in which to experience PhotoVoice first as learners in a safe, supportive space, which empowered the participants to return to their classrooms ready to teach PhotoVoice to their K-12 students. The majority of the workshop participants are licensed English as New Language/English as

Second Language (ESL) teachers whose classrooms are inhabited by ELLs from many countries of the world and who routinely have felt excluded, marginalized, or misunderstood by the larger school community due to racial, linguistic, economic, and social class differences. In addition, some of the ELLs self-identify as undocumented immigrants—a risky and severely marginalized identity to embody given current political and legal policies.

**Setting the stage.** We started our PhotoVoice project by searching for and closely examining examples of projects that we found readily available on line. Our favorite PhotoVoice websites include:

[www.PhotoVoice.org/](http://www.PhotoVoice.org/)

[www.PhotoVoiceworldwide.com](http://www.PhotoVoiceworldwide.com)

[http://www.pwhce.ca/photovoice/pdf/Photovoice\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.pwhce.ca/photovoice/pdf/Photovoice_Manual.pdf)

[www.PhotoVoicewyoming.com/](http://www.PhotoVoicewyoming.com/)

After we looked at and discussed a few PhotoVoice projects, we read about how others have implemented these projects in their schools and communities. We practiced using content area reading strategies to analyze and discuss these articles. In this case, we selected the 4 A's protocol (School Reform Initiative) to engage in this discussion because we wanted participants to explore the *assumptions* of the researchers, what they *agreed* with, what they wanted to *argue* with, and what they *aspired* to in the articles.<sup>1</sup> Other content reading strategies such as Save the Last Word for Me, Text Rendering, or Coding the Text would also work well to generate this kind of discussion and analysis of existing projects as exemplars.

In this phase of the project, it is important for participants to learn about what PhotoVoice is, see how people have used it, and ask any questions that they have about how to engage in this kind of project.

**Developing our questions.** Sometimes, the teacher chooses a question for students to research. Other times, participants choose their own research question. In our summer workshop, we asked our teachers to develop the research questions for our project. We used a Microlabs protocol ([www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol-alphabetical-list-2](http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol-alphabetical-list-2)) to discuss in small groups the following three questions:

If I could change the world, what would I do?

If I could change my community, what would I do?

If I could change my school, what would I do?

After discussing and debriefing the Microlabs activity, we listed the themes that emerged from the small group discussions.

Since we were engaging in collaborative research, we chose the themes from the list that spoke most deeply to our own experiences. Next, we used an Affinity Mapping process ([www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol-alphabetical-list-2](http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol-alphabetical-list-2)) to group our discussion themes into overarching themes. In looking at our overarching themes, we decided after much discussion that we wanted policymakers to understand what made workshop participants feel empowered and disempowered as educators.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the 4 A's protocol, please visit the School Reform Initiative website at [www.schoolreforminitiative.org](http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org)

**Taking and sharing photographs.** In the next phase of the project, we took photographs that represented how we were conceptualizing answers to our research questions. We spent time together talking about the research questions and brainstorming possible images that could represent our answers. Then we went out into the schools, community, and our homes to gather images that either concretely or abstractly represented our answers. We brought our photographs to the next session and shared stories about the images. Carolyn Wang (1994; 1997), who developed PhotoVoice, indicates that she asks her participants to discuss their photographs with the following questions in mind:

What do you see happening here?

What is really happening?

How does this relate to our lives?

Why does this problem/condition/asset exist?

How could this image educate the community/policymakers, etc.?

What can we do about it?

After we discussed our photographs in light of these guiding questions, many new ideas for photographs were generated, inspiring a second round of images. This second round of images pushed us to go deeper in an understanding of our research questions.

**Writing about our stories.** In the final phases of our project, we wrote narrative text about our photographs and how the photographs represent our answers to the research questions. From these writings, we developed descriptive photograph captions that captured the essence of our understandings.

**Sharing our stories.** After writing, we grouped the photos thematically and negotiated ways to display for our photos for an exhibition. We mounted the photos and the captions on black cardstock. Then we visited the exhibition space and decided how best to display our themes and photograph. The exhibition was viewed and experienced by teacher participants from other workshop sections.

### **How Workshop Participants Have Used PhotoVoice in Their Classrooms**

Following the conclusion of the summer workshop, teacher participants were encouraged to stay in communication with us as they adopted the use of PhotoVoice in their individual classroom settings. Next we have included representative excerpts from several teacher participants to demonstrate the power and impact of PhotoVoice as an approach for not only developing literacy skills, but also to empower marginalized students to impact their communities. All teacher participants' names and any identifying school markers have been replaced with pseudonyms and general descriptions<sup>2</sup>. To allow the participants to tell their stories in their own voices, as much as possible, the teachers' narratives have been only minimally edited for clarity or to preserve the anonymity of the teachers' and the schools' identities. Two of the authors (Michelle and Katie) of this article also share their stories here to demonstrate how their authentic K-12 classroom use of PhotoVoice method provided a successful and manageable literacy engagement for language learners.

**Monica's Story.** This semester I am using PhotoVoice as a framework for a German conversation course. This one credit course was created after several students expressed concerns about their ability to start and sustain natural conversations. PhotoVoice is the ideal

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<sup>2</sup> Note: This research project has been approved by the \_\_\_\_\_ University Institutional Review Board.

platform to facilitate these conversations—our weekly “Kaffeestunde” is brought in to focus with the pictures we share with each other. On the first day of class, I guided our discussion to uncover why we have all chosen to study German and what we love about German-speaking countries and cultures—“Warum Deutsch?” From that I established a weekly schedule of topics. In my personal reflections on this process, I have learned that my students all have very personal reasons for choosing German. I have been allowed to see all of these students as individuals with their own stories, fears, and hopes, and we have all been able to practice expressing them in German.

**Michelle’s Story.** I served as a co-teacher of this summer intensive PhotoVoice workshop. I provided for the participants an example of how I had already used PhotoVoice in my middle school ESL classroom. As a teacher-researcher, I was interested in using images as an invitation to engage students in critical dialogue and authentic, content-based language development. In one of my ESL classes, the students and I embarked on a curricular unit of inquiry called, “A Picture Speaks?”

In the first literacy activity, students were asked to select an image that held significance for them – either a photograph, magazine picture, or drawing. Each student then placed their selected image on their desktop alongside a blank piece of paper. In a gallery-walk activity, each student rotated around to examine other students’ images, and then write questions about the images. For example, a photograph of a horse incited questions such as, “Where did you see this horse?”, “Did you ride the horse? [sic]”, and “Why is the horse important to you?” These questions, then, served as prompts for writing the story of the image. More concretely, students were instructed to write what happened before, during, and/or after the moment depicted in the image. Students wrote, revised, and shared the stories of their images.

Though it was not a requirement of the assignment, all the students chose to write narratives about themselves and their families. As an example, the picture of the horse inspired the student to tell the story of how much he missed his mother, who lives in the Dominican Republic; they had been separated from one another for over a year, but his mother promised that he could ride this horse the next time he came back to the D.R. This assignment served as an introduction to the use of image as an invitation to using narrative voice, dialogue about personally-relevant issues, and as a meditational tool for language development.

Next, I showed students examples of image-based projects in which other students had participated. Examples included samples of Wendy Ewald’s (2006) work, and projects from The Viewfinder Project (“The Viewfinder Project,” 2010) in which two groups of students - one from the state of Indiana in the United States and one from Cape Town, South Africa - took pictures around the dichotomist theme “What is beautiful? What is ugly?” It is this latter project that captured my students’ attention and acted as a catalyst for brainstorming a theme for our class’ focus of image-selection. I facilitated student discussions about issues of concern to them; a frequent and recurring topic was immigration reform.

Guided by student interest, I suggested we read the personal narratives of my former students who authored *Different Worlds: Stories of Immigrant Youth by Immigrant Youth* (Author 3, 2009). Concurrently, I encouraged students to look for other forms of related literature to read and share with the class. The term “literature” was explicitly defined for students as not only traditional texts, but also books that their younger siblings have at home, pop culture magazines or websites, handwritten notes or email communications, music lyrics, advertisements, television shows, or posts found on social networking sites. The goal was to

engage readings from a critical and self-reflective stance, and to question the communicative forms and their potential implications.

Students brought in newspaper articles they had seen or read, but often didn't fully understand; they relayed anecdotes of interactions they'd witnessed in their home communities; they shared Facebook posts and messages whose racial content evoked an emotional response. Through guided discussion of these readings, the students decided upon the theme to frame their image selection: "What feels safe? What feels unsafe?"

While a wide array of images were selected throughout the process, when it was time to choose two images to write about – one that represented each of our research questions, "What feels safe? and What feels unsafe?" – most students wrote about immigration and immigration reform. Emergent themes from the students' collection of images and writing revealed the following categories: representations of inducing fear and representations of empowerment (advocacy, activism, pride).

One student wrote, "I want for the congress to see that there are a lot of Mexicans that want to live here because they have a good life in the US...[they] have to see how illegal people are treated and it does hurt..." Another shared, "...the government sometimes doesn't say what it means about freedom. I want to work hard at school and so to go to college but I don't know if I can get the monies to go because of my papers." Students who had otherwise been described as struggling readers and writers, as determined by standardized testing, demonstrated deep interest in reading and writing, a desire to think critically about current events, and a conviction to write with persuasive purpose.

**Katie's Story.** As one of the authors of this article and as the lead teacher of this summer intensive PhotoVoice workshop, I modeled the process for participants by showing and telling the story of how I had used PhotoVoice in my own middle school ESL classroom in Urban City Schools. One year, when I was teaching at Westside Middle School, the Smithsonian Institute sponsored a photography exhibition on Latino life in the United States called the *Americanos Photo Exhibition*. The exhibit traveled to several cities across the country. When the exhibit came to our city, it was housed at a local museum. They sponsored a photography competition for students in local schools.

I decided to turn this student photography exhibition into a class project. My students used disposable cameras to take photographs of life in their homes and neighborhoods. Their photographs were displayed at the museum with the Smithsonian exhibition. I used this opportunity to encourage my students to tell their stories and write. I was amazed that all of my students, even the reluctant writers, were deeply interested and engaged in their projects. I got more high-quality writing out of the project than I had from any other project that I had done with my students. An additional benefit of this project was that the students and I all learned more about each other and we had a stronger sense of classroom community. This experience inspired me to engage my students in telling their stories through writing and photography every year.



**Nadezhda's Story.** Where do I begin? That is a question I often ask myself as an ENL teacher. How do I make learning content-based and relevant? How do I make it comprehensible? How do I get to know my students who do not speak English language? After having participated in a PhotoVoice Project this summer, I was interested in trying it with my level one upper elementary EL students.

I began with myself as a model, posing the question to my newcomers: “Who is Mrs. N?” and then asked them to learn later about themselves by asking, “Who is \_\_\_?” We embarked on a journey of getting to know about each other while learning the language. I do not recollect my students ever getting more excited than when they were sharing their memories. They were engrossed into writing and got tricked into applying and using all of the vocabulary, grammar, and sentence frames learned to tell their own stories. And, most importantly, they felt pride in using their primary language which is such a significant part of who they are.

Upon reflection of the three lessons that my students and I spent writing our stories about our family experiences while improving language skills and learning how to build grammatically correct sentences, I realize again and again the importance of not only teaching but learning from and with our students. It never fails to amaze me as a teacher and a people observer how any students' eyes light up when they hear words, or just a word, in their native language or a mentioning of a familiar dish, holiday, or a tradition that they enjoy with their families. This helped me to refocus and continue not only teaching building our learning community.

**Monica's Story.** This semester I am using PhotoVoice as a framework for a German conversation course. This one credit course was created after several students expressed concerns about their ability to start and sustain natural conversations. PhotoVoice is the ideal platform to facilitate these conversations—our weekly “Kaffeestunde” is brought in to focus with the pictures we share with each other. On the first day of class, I guided our discussion to uncover why we have all chosen to study German and what we love about German-speaking countries and cultures—“Warum Deutsch?” From that I established a weekly schedule of topics. In my personal reflections on this process, I have learned that my students all have very personal reasons for choosing German. I have been allowed to see all of these students as individuals with their own stories, fears, and hopes and we have all been able to practice expressing them in German.

**Miljenka's Story.** PhotoVoice is an empowering method of combining photography and storytelling with the purpose of enhancing cultural understanding, voicing opinions and beliefs, but most importantly concerning this project, it is a powerful tool for engaging students to write and learn. Children love stories and they love picture books. They love taking picture walks and deciphering meaning through matching illustrations and words. Children love creating and telling their own stories.

At Northside Elementary, Project PhotoVoice equipped the ENL students at Language Proficiency Level 4 from 5th grade with the tools (digital Cameras and their own final published work) to illustrate their own thinking which developed strong connections between writing and their own daily, and academic life. Working through PhotoVoice helped students understand and develop key concepts in global learning and international mindedness. With a specific task in mind, the students took pictures of objects, settings, and events that illustrated examples of the task. Then they wrote paragraphs accompanying their photographs, explaining the settings and events. As a culminating experience of this project we published a grade Anthology/Photobook

recognizing each author. We collected the best piece of writing from each student and included it in the grade anthology bound in a real book format.

Students became actively engaged in the writing process while being introduced to a lifelong learning technique of observation and desire to express themselves. Active involvement is critical for sharing thoughts and experiences while building bridges through cross-cultural communication. This means we not only worked toward enhancing the language proficiency of our English Language Learners, but we worked toward students at Proficiency Level 4 reaching Fluent Proficiency Level 5 by the middle of January.

## Conclusion

As the participant narratives demonstrate, K-12 students, including beginning language learners, not only enjoy and engage in PhotoVoice projects, but also make significant progress in developing academic language proficiency in their writing. In addition, these students, many of whom have previously experienced marginalization or limited agency to have an impact on their schools and communities, find that communicating through PhotoVoice provides an opportunity to express themselves in sophisticated and empowering ways. In addition, the workshop participants were able to successfully implement the use of PhotoVoice in their various classroom settings, regardless of the age of the learners or even the stage of English acquisition, because they had first experienced PhotoVoice as learners in a collegial and collaborative setting.

As Michelle points out, when they were provided mentor texts and photos as exemplars, students were able to tackle complex the impact of personal and political realities in their lives in order to question existing structures and to imagine alternative futures. Thus PhotoVoice offers an accessible, motivating, and technologically rich entry point for young writers and their teachers an authentic and empowering forum in which to share their photos, their writing, and their stories with the school and with the broader community. As schools and classrooms continue to become increasingly technology rich, PhotoVoice has the potential to evolve and develop to adapt readily to new uses and to expand its repertoire for future classroom instructional use.

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