
Using PhotoVoice as an Evaluation Method

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Background: Engaging with youth through PhotoVoice is beneficial as a program evaluation method and functions as a method of inquiry to understand youths' perceptions of a college preparation program. The students used PhotoVoice to respond to prompts about how they learn and their opinions of the college preparation program.

Purpose: This reflection of practice article provides an example of PhotoVoice as an evaluation method.

Setting: This evaluation was conducted during the summer college preparation programming.

Intervention: The combination of student photography, photo gallery walk, and group discussion as an evaluation method.

Research design: A qualitative reflective design.

Data collection & analysis: The student photographs, narratives, and observational notes were analyzed thematically.

Findings: We found that the youth enjoyed the unique experience of PhotoVoice. The combination of student photography, narratives, gallery walk, and group discussion, were useful as an inquiry tool for this youth program.

Keywords: *PhotoVoice; youth participatory evaluation; evaluation methods; college preparation.*

Introduction

PhotoVoice in Research

PhotoVoice is a participatory method that incorporates the participants' perspectives using photographs and narratives in response to a specific prompt (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). PhotoVoice can provide marginalized community members unique and contextually grounded opportunities to communicate their perspectives to a variety of audiences. PhotoVoice is especially helpful in bridging the gap between policymakers and their constituents because it allows constituents to share their experiences with policymakers. PhotoVoice empowers participants by having them explore their experiences through their photography (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

There are many examples of PhotoVoice use with youth, such as investigating physical health (Findholt, Michael, & Davis, 2011; Thomas & Irwin, 2013), homelessness (Bender, Begun, Dunn, Mackay, & Dechants, 2018), cultural explorations of eating habits (Belon, Nieuwendyk, Vallianatos, & Nykiforuk, 2016), and community needs (Hannay, Dudley, Milan, & Leibovitz, 2013). Generally, those who apply PhotoVoice find that it promotes advocacy (Thomas & Irwin, 2013), identifies barriers (Findholt et al., 2011; Hannay et al., 2013), and engages and empowers participants (Zuch, Mathews, Koker, et al., 2013) to share their stories through the camera lens.

Through the use of PhotoVoice, Hannay et al. (2013) found that teens favor after-school programs over school-based physical activity programs, whereas parents noted barriers such as work, transportation, and safety concerns that prevented them from supporting their children in participating after-school activities. Findholt et al. (2011) found that PhotoVoice successfully engaged with rural youth in identifying needs in promoting physical health by providing the participating youth to showcase their photographs to bring awareness to physical health issues in their community. While determining school safety in South Africa, Zuch et al. (2013) found that

PhotoVoice helped identify and understand community needs that promoted action and advocacy on policy changes.

PhotoVoice and Youth

Vygotsky coined the term Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where he referred to the understanding of learning and development (Sabo, 2003). According to Sabo, youth are capable and are good at critical thinking tasks. When youths lead programs or projects, we provide youths the opportunity to enhance their critical thinking skills. PhotoVoice, a participatory activity, offers an opportunity for youth to think of how to represent their responses using a photograph. PhotoVoice has been demonstrated to be an effective tool that can empower and increase genuine participation (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011; Warne, Snyder, & Gillander Gådin, 2013).

Program Description

The college preparation program focuses on youths living in low-income families in which neither parent has a bachelor-level degree where some youths are non-traditional students. The program supports the students through tutoring, mentoring, and helping students navigate college applications to promote success in educational endeavors. The program usually occurs during the school year and includes a six-week summer program of educational classes and college visits. During the six-week summer session, the students have opportunities to learn subjects such as history, mathematics, and science. When developing the evaluation plan, it seemed appropriate to use PhotoVoice as a method of inquiry, because we believed that engaging youth in developing images that represented their understanding of complex concepts like learning and studying would encourage deeper contemplation, furthering the impact of the pre-college preparation program. For the program staff, this creative approach would increase understanding of the students' studying habits and deepen insights about the students' expectations of the program. As with most participatory methodology (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012),

this method was chosen to increase awareness of the evaluation and buy-in among the students and program staff.

Study Purpose

This reflection of practice article is focused on using PhotoVoice with youths participating in a college preparation program. For privacy, the youth's photographs and narratives are not included in this article. Instead of the photographs and narratives, we provided the youth's reflections on the use of PhotoVoice.

Methods

Sample and Recruitment

During the six-week summer program, in collaboration with the evaluation team, the program staff incorporated the PhotoVoice activity into the schedule. There were 27 students enrolled in the summer program; twenty students were preparing to enter the ninth grade and participated in the programming at a university, where they resided in university dorm rooms from Sunday night through Friday evening every week, and seven were preparing to enter the eighth grade and participated in the program by traveling each morning to a technology center and attending the classes via webcast. As some of the students are not traditional students, the ages of the students ranged from 14 to 19, nine students were male, and 18 students were female. According to their self-reported ethnicities, 16 identified as Latinx, four identified as African American/Black, five identified as Caucasian/White, one identified as Latinx/American Indian, and one person chose not to disclose their ethnicity.

This study used voluntary participation. The students were informed that they could submit all, part, or none of their responses to their coordinators and the participants' names were not attached to the submissions. There were no penalties or rewards associated with their participation. The students were instructed to answer two questions: 1) "What do you expect from the pre-college preparation program?" and 2) "How do you study?" Some responded with more than one photo, and

others did not provide any responses. At the end of the data collection period, we received 26 responses to the first prompt and 25 responses to the second prompt.

Procedures

We introduced the PhotoVoice activity in person to both groups and provided the students with opportunities to ask clarifying questions. All of the students received a handout, shown in Figure 1. They were instructed not to include any human faces in their photographs and were given 17 days to complete the activity. The students were asked to use their cell phones to capture the pictures, and if needed, the program staff and instructors would loan their cell phones to the students. The students submitted their photographs and captions to their program coordinators, who then shared the Word and PDF files with the evaluation team using Google Drive. We ensured anonymity before analysis by stripping out any identifying information. Although the students were instructed to take personal photographs, some students ended up submitting images from a Google search. The Google images were included in the analysis.

PhotoVoice Instructions

- 1** Take 1 photo per question. *Do not include faces.*

 1. What do you expect from this program?
 2. How do you study?
- 2** Write 2-3 sentences per photo, include the following:

 1. Describe the **photo**.
 2. What is **happening** in the photo?
 3. **Why** did you take a photo for this?
- 3** Save the photos & write-ups in **ONE** document and share it with Carlos.

Label your document:

 - Prompt_1
 - Prompt_2

Thank you for participating
in the evaluation!

We hope you had fun!



Figure 1. Handout for students.

Analysis

Using inductive thematic coding, we identified common themes in the captions and photographs. Using MAXQDA 2018, one coder completed the initial coding of the captions and associated photographs using an inductive approach. The first coder then reviewed the initial themes with two other coders to gain confirmation and an in-depth understanding of the identified codes. Using a thematic approach, we jointly identified three themes for Prompt 1 (what students hope to get out of the pre-college preparation program?) and four themes for Prompt 2 (how do students study?).

After the initial analysis, we held in-person gallery walks and group discussions (one with on-site students and another with distant students) to develop member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the themes identified. The gallery walks entailed walking around a room where the photographs, captions, and themes were displayed. After the gallery walk, we facilitated a discussion of the students' disagreements and agreements. From the insight provided by the gallery walk and post-walk discussions, we adjusted the codes to reflect the students' input. We used the gallery walk opportunity also to ask students what they liked and disliked about PhotoVoice. We took notes during the discussion, then entered the comments into Excel. Students comments were distributed between what they liked, disliked, and additional comments. The comments were analyzed thematically to identify common ideas shared by the students. Most (74 %) noted what they liked, and just over a third (37 %) noted what they disliked about the PhotoVoice activity.

Findings

We divided the results into three categories: findings on Prompt 1, findings on Prompt 2, and reflections from students. The average length of each submission was four sentences, though the submission length varied by student. Additionally, we gathered insights informally during the gallery walk discussions, and we share those insights where they are

relevant to the findings. The thematic findings have overlapping themes, which means a photograph and narrative could be counted twice.

Prompt 1: What Do Students Expect from the Pre-College Preparation Program?

There were 26 entries, with 51 photos. One student only submitted one photo. Two students did not participate. We identified three themes within this prompt: opportunities ($n = 20$), friendships ($n = 6$), and education ($n = 4$). 'Opportunities' was the most common theme within the photographs and narratives as the students had the chance to explore other universities via the planned field trips within the program and living at the university campus. Another identified theme was 'friendship' where the students noted that spending time with other students at the university allowed them to create relationships while exploring the campus. Lastly, we identified 'education' as the last theme for this prompt. Some of the distant students noted that they wanted to learn more to prepare them for the educational demands of university lives. The students believed that with more education, they would be able to be more successful.

Prompt 2: How Do Students Study?

We received 25 entries from 27 students, where two students did not participate in the evaluation. The students shared that they studied in different ways. While it was common for the students to include pictures of their books in front of the computer monitor, themes such as the quiet and personalized space ($n = 15$), repetition of the studied material ($n = 8$), and connections of new knowledge to established knowledge ('knowledge scaffolding') ($n = 5$) were also equally important to the students.

The students enjoyed studying in a quiet place where they could concentrate. Although going to the library was a typical response, some students mentioned that a comfortable and familiar space (e.g., a bedroom) was also valuable for studying. Based on the students'

photographs, having a place of their own, organized according to their needs, was an essential factor for their study. Although it was typical to see a photograph of books and planners organized in front of a computer monitor, the students showcased that having a place they can make their own was essential. The students also noted the importance of repetition while they studied. Students found that they could remember the material better when they were able to repeat the knowledge learned where they integrated repetition skills such as using flashcards, re-reading their notes, and asking a family member to quiz them their understanding of a particular subject. Lastly, we identified 'knowledge scaffolding' as a common theme among the students while they studied. The students prefer to connect new knowledge to familiar topics or previously established knowledge. For example, a student aptly stated that to learn about the justice system, one of the first tasks is to read criminology textbooks.

Students' Reflections

Both on-site and distant students shared what they liked and disliked about the PhotoVoice activity during the in-person group discussions. All the participating students thought that the photographs came out great and that it was an inspirational activity. The on-site students liked having the opportunity to show us what they were thinking and being able to write their thoughts freely. We learned that the on-site and distant students enjoyed the group discussion because it gave them an opportunity to discuss their experience and their photographs; the on-site students specifically said that they appreciated that their photographs were looked at thoroughly by the evaluators. Additionally, both groups of students noted that the gallery-walk and discussion groups made them feel that they were heard, and they enjoyed looking at the photographs and learning from others.

We believe the students were apprehensive about offering critiques. The on-site students who commented on what they disliked focused on the work involved in the PhotoVoice process where they said they disliked walking around the campus to take pictures or that PhotoVoice was time-consuming. The distant students

were more open to sharing their criticisms; they explained that they were dissatisfied with the time allotted to complete the project because they thought they had two days to complete the project and rushed to submit their responses. The communication error on the due date of the project was partly the evaluators and program staff fault, which resulted in the distant students offering Google-searched images.

Discussion

Although many studies support the use of PhotoVoice as a participatory action research tool, not many studies have used PhotoVoice as a method of inquiry in a college preparation program (Bender et al., 2018; Cohen, 2012; Thomas & Irwin, 2013; Zuch et al., 2013). Using PhotoVoice to inquire about students' expectations from the program and learning techniques helped the decision-makers understand the students and provided the information they can use to adjust their programming. Since the implementation of PhotoVoice and gallery walk, the program managers have requested the same method be used in evaluating other programs they oversee. The program manager's interest in applying to other programs implies they value the process and the product, whether or not they were able to actually implement any lessons learned.

The gallery walk activity turned out to be a crucial element because the students shared that they enjoyed viewing all the photographs and provided the evaluators the opportunity to gather new insights from the students. This study demonstrated PhotoVoice as a successful method of inquiry outside of social justice issues, though the results provided a similar depth of data to one-on-one interviews. From an evaluation perspective, we think that PhotoVoice combined with a gallery walk and group discussions, engaged the students in participating in the evaluation. The combination of activities enabled us to 1) develop an understanding of how beneficiaries see a program's intended outcomes, 2) provide information to decision-makers so they could adjust their programming, 3) provide another opportunity for students to think meta-cognitively about their learning (Sabo Flores,

2008; Vygotsky, 1978), and 4) expand the thinking of the students and the program stakeholders about what outcomes might look like for a pre-college preparation curriculum.

There are a few limitations to this study. Firstly, results from the small number of students do not lead to generalizations for the entire program population since the summer session of the program does not include everyone who is in the program. Only a few of the program participants enrolled in the summer program. More extensive research that incorporates all of the program students would provide a better representation of the program. Secondly, this study is limited to two questions, and they provide a rather narrow understanding of needs. We included only two questions as we did not want to burden the students. The program manager noted that the students do not have much time to complete a demanding evaluation process. Lastly, the students who attended the program via distant learning misunderstood the timeline and did not have access to cell phones. Instead of submitting their photographs, they submitted images from Google, and many felt rushed to finish it before a mistaken deadline. We identified this error when we received their submissions. We did not request additional personalized images as the program had limited time for the students to participate in the evaluation. Although they submitted Google images, their contributions were included in the analysis.

The time investment required for those participating in PhotoVoice is demanding as participants must devote their time to consider what photographs to capture and provide narration. The program manager dedicated two to three hours for the students to complete the PhotoVoice activity. However, due to the program schedule, the students noted that activity was time-consuming. The evaluators spent four months to plan the evaluation with the program manager. We created instructional brochures to allow the students, program staff, and the program manager to understand the objective of the evaluation. We also spent approximately two and a half months (an average of ten hours per week) analyzing the data and creating the report.

PhotoVoice was a useful exercise for the evaluation team and the program leaders. While it worked well with youth in this study,

questions remain about how young is too young with which to use PhotoVoice. Some experimental testing on its age limitations would be useful. The results shared in this article have been anonymized to the best of our ability because there are always concerns about consent when working with youth. Lacking that clarity, we chose to aggregate our findings and concentrate on the lessons learned.

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