

COMMENTARY

Conceptualizing the City through Photovoice

Patricia Widener

Florida Atlantic University
pwidener@fau.edu

Abstract

Photovoice is a research and teaching tool designed to document personal experiences and elicit applied discussions. In the classroom, photovoice brings theoretical concepts to life, empowers students to become co-creators of knowledge, sensitizes students to a range of city experiences, and is adaptable to unforeseen events. Photovoice also connects students to a place and community as both insiders and tourists; and beyond exams, papers, and assigned readings, photovoice starts new and experiential conversations on a course's key topics. Examples from classroom experience will be shared.

Keywords: Empowered student educators; photovoice; urban environment

Introduction

Photovoice is a participatory action or research tool that encourages resident interlocutors or research participants to photograph their lived experiences or observations for enhanced community awareness and discussion (Wang and Burris 1997). It is also a teaching tool (Schell et al. 2009; Widener and Choate 2023). Yet unlike the use of photography in the classroom (Eisen 2012) or in research (Becker 1974; Pauwels 2019; Widener 2022), photovoice elicits group discussions, action-oriented responses, and/or problem-solving deliberations. Photovoice requires the student-photographer to explain and give voice to the images shown and to connect those images to the course's concepts, theories, or perspectives. Together, the class discusses how the photographs illuminate the course's concepts locally.

Since 2015, and in courses as varied as contemporary social theory, poverty and inequality, disaster and climate change, and the social understandings and constructions of the natural environment, I have asked students to photograph how they experience or observe various theoretical concepts in the metropolitan region of Southeast Florida. Through the assignment, students become insightful educators and more knowledgeable about the course material and the social, cultural, and city spaces surrounding them.

Photovoice leads to academically-grounded conversations about memories, discoveries, shared experiences, and regional problems and pleasures.

In this commentary, I will present: 1) the general steps of the assignment; 2) how students are empowered as co-creators of knowledge; 3) how students are sensitized to challenging local topics; 4) how the assignment may be modified for unexpected occurrences; 5) how this tool may lead to long-term student benefit; and finally, 6) the assignment's classroom limitations.

The Assignment

This assignment consists of four components. Students are asked to: 1) provide two to four original photographs representing two different concepts from the course's readings; 2) explain the context and relevance of their photographs in a short paper; 3) present their photographs in class; and finally, 4) write a follow-up reflective paper individually or in small groups on what they learned about the subject and region through the photographs and presentations of others. Since this exercise occurs at the end of the semester, it serves as a review of the course's materials and as an assessment of which concepts were more applicable, better retained, misunderstood, or forgotten. In discussions and reflective papers, students frequently express a deeper understanding of a concept after seeing multiple and local experiences or renditions of it.

For my courses, the region is a coastal one in Southeast Florida, connecting the greater metropolitan areas of Palm Beach, Boca Raton, Fort Lauderdale, and Miami. This tri-county region of approximately six million people links distinct downtown areas, tourist destinations, nearby suburbs, and adjacent exurbs, and it is not uncommon for students and residents to study, work, and socialize across the towns and cities lining the coastline. For my upper-level courses, class sizes are between 20 and 40 students and the classes are taught in three-hour blocks weekly or in one-hour and twenty-minute blocks biweekly. With larger classes, I pace the discussion so that everyone has time to present. The student population is diverse in terms of longevity and experience in the region or country and given the geographical expanse of the region, many students discover the region through the photovoice assignment.

For the assignment, students are asked to photograph how two concepts from the course are experienced or observed in the region. In a course on poverty and inequality, for example, students are asked to photograph two sides of social and economic disparity. In a course on the environment, students are asked to photograph a range of topics as varied as the social construction of nature, environmental health risks, food justice, or individual identity with the natural environment. Students are then asked to write a short, approximately one-page, description and explanation of how these images speak to the course's material. After I receive everyone's photographs and explanations, I then cluster them by theme into a PowerPoint presentation. By organizing the images according to

theme, students are better able to see how one topic or concept may be observed in multiple ways in a shared or familiar region.

When students present their photographs for in-person courses, the room's lighting is dimmed, and everyone is facing large overhead screens. To see their photographs on big screens and for all of us to be looking at their images and listening to their stories and insights is usually an exciting, informative, and humbling experience for all of us. We shift into a state of concentrated engagement, and typically, lively group discussions follow. On occasion, we hear, "I know that place!" which is then followed by an enthusiastic exchange within the group and recognition that students may have unknowingly crossed paths off campus. On other occasions, and given the scale of the region, we also sound like tourists, discovering new places that we would like to explore in the future.

Afterwards, students are asked to write guided, reflective papers in class on what they learned or discovered from others. In their group discussions and introspective papers, students reveal a richer understanding of the course material and the applicability of challenging concepts to local experiences. From this exercise, big spaces and city land- and seascapes become more accessible and knowable to many students.

Empowered Educators: Observing and Experiencing the Environment

Through photovoice, students demonstrate their local expertise and experiential knowledge of place and become insiders and co-producers of knowledge as they present, discover, and discuss the applicability of course material to the region. Whether in a community setting or a classroom, photovoice confers expertise, firsthand knowledge, and an instructional role onto the photographer and presenter. Unlike passively watching a documentary and offering follow-up commentary, photovoice encourages interactive engagement with each image and presenter. Observers express a curiosity about the region or the specific photograph, which the presenter is able to clarify. The student-presenter is an expert in the circumstances surrounding their photograph. Likewise, the photographs serve as a point through which students are encouraged to discuss how they have witnessed or experienced something of significance in the region (COVID-19 or a hurricane) or in everyday life (inequality or nature-in-the-city).

When photographing for the environmental course, students become investigators and may photograph the amount of visible trash on the sidewalks or in the parks or how non-recyclables are dumped in recyclable bins. These images facilitate wider discussions on individual consumption and/or political and economic actions or inactions. "Heavy" conversations may be balanced with "light" ones, as when large-scale waste problems are followed by images of micro-level amusements. In a recent class, student photographs capturing the meaning of "nature-in-the-city" included ducks and ducklings walking across a busy parking lot and along a hospital sidewalk; an aloe plant and small herb garden; and crowded versus deserted beaches. From these images, we discussed and the students wrote in their reflection papers how wildlife live a precarious and urban "co-existence" with

people; how herbal gardens thrive in small pockets of space in the city; and how crowded and quiet public beaches reflect structural and exclusionary design decisions to encourage or deter public access. Another student showed what looked like a peaceful, tree-lined trail, before informing us that traffic sounds could always be heard.

During these presentations, the images give way to discussions, which enable students to become empowered by being the ones to initiate conversations, inform the class, and answer questions as knowledgeable presenters.

Sensitizing Students: Revealing the Obscurity of Inequality

Photovoice also lends itself to discussing accessibility, vulnerability, and invisibility. In an inequality course, students frequently capture the breadth and proximity of social and economic disparity by comparing the quality or maintenance of roadways, playgrounds, housing, shopping areas, or transportation. However, sensitizing students to the lived experience of inequality – beyond visually capturing those experiences – requires more challenging and uncomfortable discussions.

When I first introduced this assignment, and despite warnings in class, some students photographed homeless or unhoused people, outdoor encampments, or people asking for assistance at busy intersections – despite my request for them not to invade anyone’s privacy. Over time, my written guidelines became longer and clearer and my spoken guidelines added more and more examples of what to avoid to remain respectful of another person’s dignity and to be mindful of universal decency, humanity, and civility. Unlike other classroom activities, photovoice serves as a unique opportunity to have discussions about real-life social impacts given that the students are inserting themselves into city life through their photography. Conversations about the meaning of ethical and professional responsibility and how not to harm anyone in the pursuit of one’s study or how to engage with others in a respectful manner shift from abstractions toward specific and applied examples during their presentations.

Subsequently, issues of accessibility, vulnerability, and privilege come forward in our discussions. For instance, students photograph lower-income, private spaces at close range. From narrow streets and in neighborhoods with few sidewalks, students photograph front doors in close proximity to them, unintentionally revealing how these homes are unguarded and unprotected from public view. In contrast, students photograph higher-income spaces at a distance and through barriers, such as gated communities, guard posts, deep front lawns, or fenced-in boat docks. Through photovoice, the class sees, discusses, and participates in socioeconomic divisions and public distinctions between hardship and privilege. Students may also reflect on their own positions relative to others.

Perceptions of advantage and disadvantage come to life through students’ photography and the preferential treatment granted to and imposed by the wealthy, facilitating a discussion on how wealth protects a population from observation and

commentary in city spaces. Likewise, some students are more likely to express awe (or “awww”) at the yachts and displeasure with lower-income spaces (“Why don’t they clean their yard”). From the assigned readings, students learn the theories and statistics, but through photovoice they observe their local participation in distinguishing groups of people. Not only are the wealthy able to control the narrative and image of themselves (forcing photographs to be taken from afar), we see and discuss the absence of visual representations of the political economy of inequality. Individual behaviors appear pronounced, while structural violence appears almost invisible, explaining in part why it is so challenging to grasp.

Once our discussion begins, many students are temporarily silenced by what they did not or could not see and by what was revealed through our discussion of omitted actors or institutions. On occasion, it seems easier for everyone to discuss documentaries from faraway places than to discuss where we live, study, play, or work. In class, we try to spend time thinking through or reflecting on our personal discomforts.

Rapid Modifications

This assignment is also amenable to a range of courses, diverse settings, the need for spontaneity or flexibility, and extraordinary moments. Hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic are just two disruptions that occurred during my courses that demanded a rapid response alongside an opportunity for local, engaged, and collaborative learning. Sometimes this visual and voiced exercise generates a sense of camaraderie within the group. At other times, critical and practical insights are exchanged and we witness how our group embodies a purposively informative social network.

When courses went online during COVID-19, the “city” shrunk into our homes and neighborhoods, but it grew in the sense that we were spread farther apart from each other. During the first semester online, I employed photovoice to facilitate conversations on the unprecedented experience as it related to the course material and to connect class participants to our shared and individual experiences and strategies. Our curiosity on how others were faring was heightened, and photovoice lent us some insight into how others were managing this unparalleled moment. Photovoice served as an opportunity for students to see the vastness of experiences and the variety of risks and securities in the city, while also promoting unplanned conversations – led or initiated by students.

Assessment: Within and Beyond the Classroom

In short, photovoice has the potential to provide students an empirical and student-generated understanding of the city and to develop skills and confidence beyond university life. I am able to assess whether and how students gain a deeper understanding of urban life through photovoice through their descriptive papers, discussions, and post-presentation reflections. When students visualize the assigned perspectives in their everyday lives, they shift from being recipients of information to being educators,

educating all of us on life in the city and how the course's key concepts are embodied locally. We become a small group talking about the city through the discipline's lenses and locating ourselves in much larger social, economic, and cultural systems.

The region serves as both the setting and scene that connects and separates us – physically, culturally, and socially. We are residents of a place, and yet, we are not residents of the same place, so we have much to teach and learn from each other about the region. For example, the urban environment is contextualized when transportation photos facilitate conversations on the bane of interstate congestion, limited public transportation, and the cost of parking. We complain and celebrate together as urban dwellers. The city-coastal-tourist setting also provides many students with part-time and full-time employment and enables a camaraderie among year-round “locals,” even though many of us have recent domestic and international migration stories to share. The metropolitan region also connects us across different backgrounds, migration histories, and places of work and residence.

Ideally, students also discover that photovoice is a community-based tool to bring people together, elicit novel conversations, celebrate communal life, and/or solve local problems that may be applicable to their future careers in local government, education, community work, non-profit organizations, or disaster or economic relief work. Unfortunately, I have no data or “hi professor” emails to support that it is being used by former students.

Up to now, this end-of-semester activity has at least one limitation. It fails to generate actionable, collective solutions toward making our surroundings better. In the classroom, individual empowerment among co-creators of knowledge is achieved; however, group empowerment in solving community problems is not realized in this term-limited exercise.

Overall, this assignment enables students to demonstrate their critical thinking and discussion skills on important local matters, while we laugh together and despair together as we study, work, and/or reside together in a compelling and complicated region.

References

- Becker, Howard S. 1974. “Photography and Sociology.” *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1: 3–26.
- Eisen, Daniel B. 2012. “Developing a Critical Lens: Using Photography to Teach Sociology and Create Critical Thinkers.” *Teaching Sociology* 40 (4): 349–359. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X12448322>.
- Pauwels, Luc. 2015. *Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Schell, Kara, Alana Ferguson, Rita Hamoline, Jennifer Shea, and Roanne Thomas-Maclean. 2009. "Photovoice as a Teaching Tool: Learning by Doing Visual Methods." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 21 (3): 340–352.
- Wang, Caroline, and Mary Ann Burris. 1997. "Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment." *Health Education and Behavior* 24 (3): 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>.
- Widener, Patricia. 2022. "The Visual Opportunity Spaces of Oil: In Promotion, Protest, and Warning." *Visual Studies* 37 (5): 541–556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2020.1837666>.
- Widener, Patricia, and Gail Choate. 2023. "Fusing Outrage and Hope into Acts of Resistance, Volunteerism, and Allyships." Pp. 131–146 in *Anthropological Optimism: Engaging the Power of What Could Go Right*, edited by Anna Willow. New York: Routledge.