IASSW - International Project
Creating Global Social Work Visionaries through PhotoVoice

Project Team Members

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Executive Summary

The goal of our project was to enhance social work education by applying PhotoVoice methodology, motivated by our concern about the heavy reliance on verbal and written communication in social work education. Such a reliance, accelerated by the rapid spread of online courses due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, privileges students with oral communication and writing skills and disadvantages others. In an effort to incorporate additional ways for students to engage, learn, and demonstrate their knowledge and skills, we applied PhotoVoice, a participatory action research and educational methodology grounded in Freirean principles of conscientização [critical consciousness]. We co-developed a PhotoVoice course for MSW students and co-taught four times. Centering on the issues of social inclusion and exclusion, the course had multiple learning objectives, including: to learn about PhotoVoice methodology and its application to social work practice in increasingly complex, global contexts; to enhance understanding on social inclusion and exclusion; and to recognize alternative approaches to knowledge construction and dissemination. Learning by *doing*, students took photographs, engaged in group discussions, and created "voices." Students' photographs and voices, discussion narratives, and feedback point to the wide applicability and potential transferability of PhotoVoice as a pedagogical approach conducive to collective, reflexive learning.

Rationale and Purpose

With the aim of enhancing social work education to prepare students to practice in increasingly complex, global contexts, this project sought to co-develop a course applying PhotoVoice methodology (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris 1994, 1997). Our efforts to co-create this PhotoVoice course were motivated by our concern about the heavy reliance on verbal and written communication in higher education, social work education included. With the increased popularity of online courses, this tendency has intensified. This privileges students with oral communication and writing skills and disadvantages others, furthering educational disparities. Our concern echoes the critique leveled against education as a system: "a means of oppression, continually re-creating social class divisions" (Chet & Frederique, 2005, p. 21). We sought to decenter the verbal and written means of expression and to allow new ways of learning and producing knowledge in social work classrooms.

In an effort to incorporate additional ways for students to engage, learn and demonstrate their knowledge and skills, we proposed to use PhotoVoice as a way to create channels for other means of engagement and expression in classrooms. PhotoVoice, we saw, was a promising means to promote learning processes that are grounded in Freirean principles of conscientização (Freire, 1970, 1973).

Photovoice, a method of participatory action research and education, was developed during the 1990s as part of

an action research project—the Yunnan Women's Reproductive Health and Development Program—which sought to enhance women's health in a rural village in China (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris 1994, 1997). In a PhotoVoice project, participants take photographs related to the themes of the project and discuss them in a small group. While the program duration and the frequency and number of meetings vary, typically multiple photo-taking and meetings are held. Along the way, participants create short written texts, called "voices," that accompany selected photographs.

Theoretically and epistemologically, PhotoVoice is grounded in the tradition of empowerment and emancipatory adult education, feminist theories, and documentary photography (Wang 1999; Wang & Burris 1994; Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996). It is through ongoing photo-taking and engaging in small group discussions that participants record, share, and examine their own life conditions and society at large. Participants are encouraged to collectively analyze what they experienced and/or observed; explore underlying sociocultural, sociopolitical, and sociohistorical factors and processes; formulate strategies for bringing about change; and engage in action for change as well as encourage others to do so as well. It is not uncommon for the photographs and voices to expose previously invisible or neglected issues and failures or inadequacies of social policies and programs (Carlson et al., 2006; Marquez, 2021; Marques et al., 2023; PhotoVoice Project, 2018, 2023; Yoshihama, 2019, 2021; Yoshihama & Yunomae, 2018). These theoretical and epistemological orientations are consistent with social work philosophies, missions, and values (Malka, 2022; Molloy, 2007; Yoshihama et al., 2022, In Press).

PhotoVoice has been applied to educational settings (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Lichty, 2013; Massengale et al., 2016; Stroud, 2014), including social work education (Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015; Bromfield & Capous-Desyllas, 2017; Malka, 2022; Moxley, 2018; Mulder & Dull, 2014; Peabody 2013). Peabody (2013), for example, used PhotoVoice in a social work class, asking students to document and identify issues facing the community and to help formulate an advocacy plan; "Through this process, the students learn about the power of collaborative creativity and strategic messaging" (p. 251).

Capitalizing on these strengths of PhotoVoice, we sought to create an innovative educational space where students can learn experientially and collectively through repeated photo-taking and group discussions.

Course Planning

We chose to focus on social inclusion and exclusion—critical issues in social work globally—and created a 1-credit graduate-level course. To promote "learning by doing" (Freire, 1982), we centered the course around PhotoVoice activities, such as photo-taking, group discussions using photographs, creating and revising voices, and sharing photographs and voices. Through this process, students would learn not only about the PhotoVoice methodology but also about the course themes (i.e., social inclusion and exclusion). Importantly, students would experience firsthand an alternative way to develop knowledge as they see how one's own photographs and discussion narratives shape peers' understanding of social exclusion and integration. This, we believed, would not only empower students as knowledge creators but also would lead them to honor the perspectives and insights of individuals and communities they work with as valid and legitimate sources of knowledge.

We offered our course on two weekend days. To allow for sufficient time to digest and reflect on the first session's learning, take additional photographs, and prepare for the second session, we scheduled Session 2 to occur two weeks later.

Students would take photographs during Session 1 and between the two sessions on the theme of social inclusion and exclusion. In each session, students participate in small group and class-wide discussions facilitated by our Project Team members. Along the way, students would create "voices" (short narratives/messages) to accompany selected photographs. They would share their photo-voice sets with each other for further learning.

To scaffold and supplement their learning, we included additional learning activities utilizing a range of pedagogical approaches, including readings and video clips, case examples, short lectures, case studies, presentations, and a mini research project investigating and evaluating an application of PhotoVoice in various context globally.

Unbeknownst to us at the time of writing the grant proposal, online education has spread swiftly and extensively as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our concern regarding educational disparities grew even greater. While some students were able to transition from in-person to online learning relatively smoothly, others faced multitudes of barriers and challenges. Those with limited resources lacked access to necessary equipment, had limited or no internet access, and lacked suitable learning space in the home environments. Due to closures of schools, care facilities, and community programs, caretaking and caregiving burdens increased. Unsurprisingly, this increase was highly uneven, impacting women and single parents more heavily. These factors contributed to the difficulty to attend and fully engage in online courses, widening inequities among students (Morris et al., 2020). Furthermore, measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as lockdowns and social distancing, exacerbated a sense of isolation, which had been already quite prevalent among students before the pandemic.

Informed by these new and unfolding realities, we sought to maximize in-person interaction.We first offered the course in the Fall of 2021 when in-person teaching was allowed to resume. Thus, we chose to deliver the course in a hybrid format, where students meet in person, and Project Team members located abroad join online.

Implementation and Outcomes

We co-taught the PhotoVoice course four times in four semesters at the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA: Fall 2021; Fall 2022; Winter 2023; and Winter 2024. The class size ranged from 16 to 21. The vast majority of the students were MSW students, along with a small number of graduate-level students from various disciplines, such as public health, public policy, urban planning, and LS&A.

Students took a wide range of photographs of what they thought represented social inclusion and exclusion on campus and around their communities. They met in small groups to discuss social inclusion and exclusion using their photographs. Each group consisted of 5 to 7 students and was facilitated by each of the Project Team members. Class-wide discussions, reflections, and other course activities supplemented students' learnings.

It is difficult to select examples of PhotoVoice created by students in class given the vast diversity. We discuss and present a few below.

Many students took photographs depicting exclusion based on physical abilities, as seen in the following PhotoVoice titled, *Exclusion Against Differently-Abled Bodies?:*
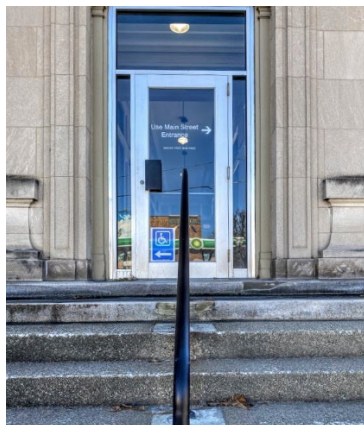
> The County Administration Building checks the box for ADA accessibility…or does it? Everybody must use the main entrance—unless your body isn't like everybody, then you must use the back entrance. Where is the dignity in rolling a wheelchair down a back alley shared with shipping trucks?

Exclusion based on financial, social, and cultural capital were also frequent themes in the students' PhotoVoice. For example, one student photographed slick-looking benches at the city's main bus terminal. Stylish in design, but they are narrow; the presence of what appears to be armrests makes it difficult to lie down on them. This student created the following voice, with the title, *Rest*:

What comes to mind when you think of a person who deserves to rest? Is it someone who has been working all day? Is it a parent who spent all day caring for their children? Is it a person who just ran a marathon? Is it a person who had to earn it? That's silly, right? Rest should be for anyone who needs it. Rest is a basic need for every human being. But in America, just like everything else, rest is political. Rest is a privilege and rest must be earned by paying your dues. Although the rows of benches with armrests in this photo appear harmless, almost inconspicuous. They represent just how political rest is. This seemingly ordinary architecture, features "armrests" that make it impossible and uncomfortable to sleep on the bench. For people who are unhoused, this bench may be the only place they feel safe to sleep or rest. These armrests further displace them by forcing them into unsafe hiding spots and exposure to police harassment for trying to find spaces to rest to survive. Although it's a smaller piece of the overall pie, perhaps these armrests represent the true capitalist, American spirit. They are like a metaphor for the subtle ways that America forces us to earn our rights, hidden through a promise of liberty. But we cannot forget, that in our free America, people have to earn their right to rest, to survive, to simply exist.

Another student took a bus stop without any seating area and created the following voice:

This is just one of many bus stops on this route and in the city that doesn't have seating for citizens. Children, adults, an elders use this stop to ride to work, home, the grocery store, the doctor's office, etc. The Americans with Disabilities Act doesn't require every bus stop to have seating. What about the people who need it? Is this a campaign against homeless people using these stops to rest and sleep?

Notably, the last sentence of this student's voice, "Is this a campaign against homeless people using these stops to rest and sleep?" echoes the above-mentioned message "Rest is a basic need for every human being. But in America, just like everything else, rest is political." This type of echoing—e.g., apparently different photographs and contexts may represent similar/same issue—is a hallmark of the collective dialectical processes embedded in the PhotoVoice methodology.

Students' PhotoVoice also captured the high price of basic necessities, lack of affordable healthy, nutritious food, and lack of access to grocery stores. In contrast, they also took photographs and created voices to depict business establishments and merchandise geared toward affluent clientele. Relatively fewer in number was the depiction of social inclusion. Furthermore, students often identified contradictions and discrepancies between appearance and reality, as seen in the following voice, *The Billing Station*:

Inclusion is symbolic and physical. With a flag or a sign, we create spaces for identities of all types. People gather in this place for healthy sustenance and acceptance. This comfort is afforded to any and everybody . . . who can afford the cost of admission, which requires a smartphone to even access the menu. Inclusion that comes with a price.

Through repeated photo-taking, small group meetings, and class-wide discussions, students not only identified the overt social exclusion but also uncovered covert policies, programs, and practices of exclusion, often masked under the guise of positive façade of inclusion or otherwise "justifiable" cause. They questioned whether they were intentionally masked or unintentionally done due to a lack of awareness/insight.

To reinforce their learning, students engaged in an assignment consisting of a mini research project investigating and evaluating an application of PhotoVoice in various contexts globally and making a short presentation in class. The assignment asked students to go beyond describing how, where, by whom, and with whom PhotoVoice was applied and to analyze and critique the ways in which and the extent to which project organizers and researchers addressed the issues of safety and ethical issues as well as privilege, oppression, diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

During the class, we, Project Team members, also made a brief presentation on our own participatory action research projects that applied PhotoVoice. This included:
- José Luis Fernández-Pacheco Sáez: PhotoVoice with local high school students, Extremadura, Spain
- Eduardo Marques: PhotoVoice with individuals deported from the USA and unhoused, Azores, Portugal; also undergraduate social work courses applying PhotoVoice at the University of

Azores, Portugal
- António Patrão: Fire PhotoVoice with fire fighters and with local residents of Mafra, Lisbon District, Portugal also training for fire fighters applying PhotoVoice
- Mieko Yoshihama: PhotoVoice with women affected by the Great East Japan Disaster, Japan; also PhotoVoice with residents of favelas, São Paulo, Brazil

Our presentations served as real-life examples of varied ways in which PhotoVoice can be applied to address a range of social issues, with diverse population groups and communities, and in various countries.

Feedback

Student feedback on the course has been positive and speaks of multiple dimensions of learning that took place in the class. Many students stated that they learned differently from other courses which primarily rely on readings, lectures, and assignments involving written papers and oral presentations. They commented affirmatively on the value of learning by *doing* as well.

Many students stated that they developed new perspectives, deepened their awareness, and expanded understanding. They described their experiences using phrases such as "challenged to think outside the box," "eye opening," and "gave me a fresh and new outlook on social work and the world as a whole."

Students spoke of the course's impact in various ways; for example, the course encouraged reflections, promoted personal growth, "felt really impacted … as the material required us to reflect on my life and views more critically" and "the instructor has changed my life and in doing so changed the world." Students often spoke of a change in their daily lives, such as slowing down or stopping to take notice of things in their surroundings more intently and to explore their meanings more critically.

Importantly, students pointed out that PhotoVoice affected how they view knowledge; for example, recognizing and valuing "people's experiences as knowledge." PhotoVoice also helped students represent and express themselves in new and different ways, in the words of one student, "in ways that I didn't know were possible before."

Many students stated that they enjoyed the global perspectives represented in the course, such as working with facilitators from different countries and learning about various PhotoVoice projects conducted in different countries.

As discussed above, addressing a pervasive sense of isolation and disconnectedness was important as the COVID-19 pandemic restricted much in-person contact in the previous year. Students commented that the course helped foster social connection.

Students also commented on different and alternative ways of learning about and understanding people and communities they work with in their practice; they saw PhotoVoice as being able to "uplift communities and be used for change" and "a very diverse tool to have in your toolbox." The class "better prepared me to serve clients, communities and/or constituents," said one student.

Students' comments also suggest that the impact of the course goes beyond classroom and extends to the field of practice. Students spoke of the applicability of, and interest in applying, PhotoVoice in their practice settings: In each semester, several students indeed applied PhotoVoice in their field placement. When one student proposed to apply PhotoVoice in her global field placement, her co-workers and supervisors saw the potential of PhotoVoice as an effective participatory approach, which led to an online seminar at a social work program in Chile (Yoshihama & Fernández-Pacheco Sáez, 2023).

Impact on Curriculum

During the project's tenure, the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan underwent major curriculum restructuring. It replaced the long-standing structure consisting of method majors (e.g., interpersonal practice, community organizing, human service management, and policy & evaluation) and area concentration (e.g., health, mental health, older adult, children and families) with what we call "pathways." While most pathways are

reframed and reformulated method majors and concentrations, such as the *Welfare of Children & Families Pathway* and the *Interpersonal Practice in Integrated Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Pathway*, the PI worked along with colleagues to create a new pathway, the *Global Social Work Pathway*. We also worked to ensure that a PhotoVoice course gets integrated into the core curriculum with regular offerings, instead of a special course subject to funding and/or administrative discretion. The PhotoVoice course is now designated as an elective course regularly offered by the *Community Change Pathway* and co-hosted by the *Program Evaluation Pathway*.

Dissemination

We have been building a website, *PhotoVoice for Global Social Work*, to present our activities. The site title—PhotoVoice for Global Social Work—reflects our focused commitment to promoting global social work education via PhotoVoice. Though the IASSW grant has ended, we will continue to update and enhance the website.

We have also co-authored several papers, including:
- Yoshihama, M., Marques, E., J. Fernandez-Pacheco Sáez, J. L., & Patrão, A. (In Press). PhotoVoice in social work research, practice, and education: Challenges and possibilities. In A. López Peláez, A. Keet & C. M. Sung (Eds.), *Social welfare programs and social work education at a crossroads: New approaches for a post-pandemic society*. Routledge.
- Marques, E., J. Fernandez-Pacheco Sáez, J. L., & Yoshihama, M. (2023). PhotoVoice in the time of digital social work. A. López Peláez & G. Kirwan (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of digital social work* (Ch. 5, pp. 36-45). Routledge.
- Fernández-Pacheco Sáez, J.L., Rasskin-Gutman, I., Marques, E., & Yoshihama, M. (2022). The role of (digital) PhotoVoice in community development and the construction of collective identity: Promoting critical and participative citizens through education. *Research in Education and Learning Innovation Archives (REALIA)*. https://ojs.uv.es/index.php/realia/article/view/21795

We, as a project team, have made presentations at academic and professional settings, including:
- Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development 2022 (SWESD2022, jointly organized by the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Council on Social Welfare), Seoul, Republic of Korea.
- International Conference on Digital Tools and Innovation in Humanitarian Response: Cooperation and the exchange of good practices, the Faculty of Law, the National Distance Education University (UNED) & Fundación UNED, Ourense, Spain.
- 30 Years of Photovoice: Past, Present, and Future, First Virtual Conference About Photovoice organized by Photovoice Worldwide.
- CombART 2022 – International Conference on Arts, Activism and Citizenship, Porto, Portugal.
- Department of Social Work, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

In addition to our collective presentations, we individually presented our respective PhotoVoice-related work at various venues, including universities and academic and professional conferences, as well as community venues and training sites in our respective countries (Japan, Portugal, and Spain) and beyond (e.g., Brazil, New Zealand). Online presentations allowed us to reach broader audiences as well.

Conclusions

Our ongoing experiences of co-developing and co-teaching the PhotoVoice course point to the applicability of PhotoVoice in social work education and elucidated the strengths and its potentials as a participatory and engaging pedagogical approach to train social work students to practice in diverse global contexts. Learning about PhotoVoice by doing it, social work students in turn deepened their understanding of PhotoVoice as a participatory action method that they can apply to social work practice contexts; they acquired a new and alternative approach to work with individuals and communities to

honor their perspectives. As students had an in-vivo experience of what it would be like for a participant, they developed a keen sense of ethical responsibilities when working with individuals and communities. They also recognized that knowledge development can take many forms and that they (and clients they work with) can create important knowledge themselves. Through their own photo-taking and group discussions, they deepened their understanding of critical societal issues, such as social inclusion and exclusion, and recognized and appreciated alternative ways of learning and recognized themselves as knowledge creators—the process of conscientização (Freire, 1970). By interacting with fellow students, students also fostered connections with fellow classmates. The project also helped increase global perspective among students.

We, the Project Team members, also have deepened our understanding about PhotoVoice as a participatory action educational/pedagogical approach. We identified commonalities and diversities in how social exclusion and inclusion manifest themselves, are maintained, reinforced, and/or contested across different countries and regions. We have also solidified our collaborative working relationships over the years, continuing to collaborate on various project, co-presenting and co-authoring our work as well as furthering efforts to apply PhotoVoice in global social work education as discussed below.

Transferability of the Project

The PhotoVoice method lends itself to being highly applicable and transferable in social work education and beyond. Opportunities to apply the method exist in both undergraduate and graduate level social work courses; across various countries and languages; and in a wide array of themes and social issues, including abstract concepts such as social exclusion and inclusion.

Professor Marques' applications of the PhotoVoice method well attest to this. In addition to our collaborative course development and teaching, Professor Marques developed and taught two social work undergraduate PhotoVoice courses at the University of the Azores, Ponta Delgada, Portugal. One course focused on social exclusion, which is the key issue addressed in our collective courses at the University of Michigan in the USA. Another course grappled with the issue of economy, a highly abstract topic. The students demonstrated their ability to identify and reflect on the various levels of abstraction of these concepts. They also learned from classmates about different and/or new perspectives. PhotoVoice served as an effective pedagogical tool in the development of a reflexive, and critical learning space while at the same time allowing for construction of relevant knowledge related to the course objectives. PhotoVoice promoted participatory and reflective learning by *doing*.

Adding to this observed transferability in social work classrooms in both undergraduate and graduate programs, Professor Fernández-Pacheco Sáez applied PhotoVoice to two high school classrooms: the Social Integration class and the Promotion of Gender Equality class. In these courses, students were asked to take photographs about a somewhat concrete issue – changes students and their loved ones have been experiencing since/during the COVID-19 pandemic, unlike our college undergraduate and graduate courses that focused on abstract issues. Through photo-taking and group discussions, high-school students in these classes discussed not only their subjective experiences (e.g., hardship, loss) but also relevant aspects of society in general and course content (Social Integration and Gender Equality) as they identified how social policies impact people differently depending on their social positionalities (Fernández-Pacheco Sáez et al, 2022).

These high school classes were conducted during the pandemic when face-to-face interactions were restricted. Thus, a hybrid model was adopted—initially implemented virtually and later in person (Fernandez-Pacheco Sáez et al., 2022). This provided an opportunity to assess the applicability of PhotoVoice in a virtual educational setting. Additionally, this experience illustrates the applicability of PhotoVoice as a pedagogical tool beyond social work and college education, extending to high school education.

Moving forward, Professor Marques is taking the lead in planning for the development of PhotoVoice

course(s) in social work programs across various countries focusing on Calentamiento Global/Global Warming, one of the major urgent issues confronting our environment globally. We are in the early planning stages, and thus far, programs in Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the USA have expressed interest. While institutional barriers are challenging, we are working to build a cooperative virtual learning community for social work students across universities and countries.

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