



A Case Study of Photovoice as a Critical Reflection Strategy in a Field Seminar

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Introduction

While Photovoice has been gaining momentum in social work practice, and specifically participatory research methods, it has not been explored as a teaching strategy for critical reflection in the social work discipline. This manuscript seeks to open that discussion by describing the use of Photovoice as a teaching strategy to support student professional identity development and encourage creative critical reflection in a graduate field seminar. A case study of a campus-based MSW field seminar discusses the planning, application, and reflections of implementing this participatory method as a teaching strategy.

Literature Review

Professional Identity Development and Critical Reflection

There is a dearth of literature on how social workers develop their professional identity, especially in a higher education setting. Professional identity development has mainly been tangentially studied (i.e. focused on dimensions of professional identity rather than on development itself) (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). Additionally, studies on professional identity formation tend to focus on post-graduation experiences as compared to those through interprofessional learning experiences, internships and field experiences in academia (Abrandt Dahlgren, Hult, Dahlgren, Hård af Segerstad, & Johansson, 2006). As defined from a health professions standpoint, Higgs (1993) noted, professional identity develops when an individual incorporates the attitudes, beliefs, and standards that support the practitioner role and identify as a member of their profession with a clear understanding of the responsibilities of their profession. In social work, professional identity has been conceptualized by Carpenter & Platt (1997) as the self-perceived sense of fit between professional and personal values and by workplace setting. For future social workers,

critical reflection and reflective practice are important aspects of professional identity development.

Critical reflection has been defined as “reflective practice that focuses on the power dimensions of assumptive thinking, and therefore on how practice might change in order to bring about change in the social situations in which professionals work” (Fook, 2007, p. 441-442). Social work field seminars and their accompanying internships are two of the key spaces where students have an opportunity to critically reflect upon their development of professional identity. Williamson, Hostetter, Byers, & Huggins (2010) note the importance of strengthening the practicum experience through more reflective experiences. They outline that the key strategies for critical reflection in field seminars include: supervision, process recordings, journaling, values conflict discussions, and case analyses. As students reflect on their field experiences utilizing these key strategies, they are able to add to their practice skills and knowledge, connect personal and professional values, build confidence and self-awareness, and thus contribute to the development of their professional identity (Shlomo, Levy, & Itzhaky, 2012). Furthermore, Dill (2017) points to the literature supporting the notion that field instructors play an integral role in helping students to engage in reflective thinking.

Photovoice

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method, originally introduced by Wang & Burris (1997), that provides an opportunity for individuals and groups to record and reflect their communities’ strengths and concerns through photography. First seen in public health, this method has become an invaluable tool for understanding how people construct and define what matters to them, and leads to powerful action for disenfranchised populations nationally and internationally (Wang, 1999). Over the last twenty years, the value, importance, and method of Photovoice have been steadfastly documented across disciplines throughout the literature including: water rights with First Nations People in Canada (Bradford, Zagozewski, & Bharadwaj, 2016), drug prevention with rural Hawaiian youth (Helm et al., 2015), urban food justice in the United States (Harper et al., 2017), critical consciousness (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006), and rural health in the United States (Royse & Dignan, 2008).

Photovoice as a tool inherently fits within social work values and the *Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative* (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2017), given the bridge between technology and advocating for the rights of disenfranchised populations through an empowerment approach. In a straightforward protocol

using Photovoice as a part of CBPR described in the *Community Tool Box* (University of Kansas Work Group for Community Health and Development, 2016), a group of people will come together to address some type of concern. Once specific concerns are identified, a designated leader will help to obtain cameras and provide training on how to use the cameras for participants. Collaboratively the group determines the prompts they will use to guide their photo journey. Next, the photographs are developed or printed followed by an analysis process. The analysis is critical and reflective of the story behind why the photograph was taken, as well as the elements in the picture itself. The results of the analysis are then shared with key stakeholders, put on display, and pushed for action to be taken.

Given the influence Photovoice has on critical reflection (Horwitz, 2012), there is great potential for the use of Photovoice as a reflection strategy in a social work field seminar. Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, and Foster-Fishman (2006) found that Photovoice offered insight into individual identity and values identification after exploring connection to community through photography. Schell, Ferguson, Hamoline, Shea, and Thomas-Maclean (2009) identified gaps in the literature, pointing out that Photovoice as a teaching tool has been sparingly explored but has promising implications for teaching and learning. Schell et al. (2009) also noted that Photovoice provided sociology students with a new way of understanding the world and encouraged critical thinking skills. Thus, Photovoice has compelling potential to be incorporated into social work education as a teaching tool. This manuscript seeks to fill the gaps in part, and encourage creative critical reflection by incorporating Photovoice in the classroom for social work students.

Case Study

The use of Photovoice as a critical reflection strategy took place during the 2016-2017 school year in a rural institution located in the Pacific Northwest. The new teaching strategy was incorporated into a year-long graduate field seminar for concentration-year students within an advanced generalist curriculum. In the current program, field seminar instructors act as both field liaisons that visit internship sites and instructors who facilitate seminar discussions. Seminars typically include weekly processing sessions of field experiences and students are required to engage in a variety of reflection assignments during their two-semester experience. During the Fall semester, students present, analyze, and discuss a unique case with their classmates as well as complete monthly journal entries. In the Spring semester, in addition to journal entries, students take on a leadership role during seminar and facilitate one session or teach a skill shop based on what they are learning in their internship placements. All students

in the concentration year have completed a previous internship in their foundation year, or BSW program if they are advanced standing students, and are familiar with generalist seminar expectations including group sharing and difficult dialogues.

As a new instructor in this program, the author was looking to transform the field seminar course to include activities that reflected advanced generalist principles, including ones that blended micro and macro practice skills. In practice, the author had previously partnered with youth and their community partners toward policy advocacy that included Photovoice and other participatory methods. Throughout those experiences, the author recognized the value of Photovoice for critical reflection. The author appreciated that Photovoice provided a unique opportunity for the youth to engage in dialogue about their everyday lives and experiences by sharing photos, sharing stories about their photos, and utilizing their stories to precipitate action. In recognition that field seminar students were already willing to be thoughtfully engaged with one another in their interactions, the author considered that they might be willing to reflect on their process using photography as a creative medium.

The field seminar had a combination of ten advanced standing and two-year students. On the first day of class, students were introduced to the idea of incorporating Photovoice as a reflection strategy. They agreed to using this method to help them process their internship experiences and connect those experiences to the development of their professional identity. In the second week of class, students were taught about Photovoice, in particular, how to use the practice with clients and agencies in the field, and also how to engage in the process as a learner of the method. Students were required to read the Wang & Burris (1997) article introducing Photovoice and were provided a handout with additional readings and resources on the method. They compared reflection strategies and discussed how Photovoice would be just one of the many ways to reflect on their internship experiences in seminar. Based on the definition of professional identity development (Carpenter & Platt, 1997), students collaboratively identified and responded to four prompts over the course of the year for their Photovoice reflections. Students were instructed and agreed to only take photographs of objects and places outside of their internships rather than people and faces to maintain confidentiality. With start-up funds from the institution, approximately \$50 dollars were used to purchase 5x7 frames and photography paper.

For each activity, students submitted their top photo prior to the identified week of the Photovoice reflection. Once photos were submitted they were printed for each student and placed in the frames. Individually as well as collectively, the students analyzed and shared their photographs in the four designated seminar class sessions. At the end

of the year, students reflected on the collection (gallery) of their photos and connected these to their professional identity. The analysis process followed the PHOTO protocol (Horwitz, 2012) allowing students to reflect individually and as a group. Four prompts were developed by students. Prompts 1 & 2 were implemented in the Fall semester and prompts 3 & 4 were implemented in the Spring semester.

Table 1: PHOTO Protocol (Horwitz, 2012)

PHOTO Protocol Question Prompts

P	Describe your <i>picture</i> .
H	What is <i>happening</i> in your picture?
O	Why did you take a picture <i>of this</i> ?
T	What does this picture <i>tell</i> us about your life as a social work student?
O	How can this picture provide <i>opportunities</i> for us to improve life in regards to social work practice?

Reflection Activity 1:

A week prior to the reflection, students agreed on the first prompt and were able to submit their photos prior to the following class. At the start of class, the PHOTO protocol prompts were written on the whiteboard and all photographs were framed and placed on the desk of each student. The instructor requested students spend the first twenty minutes of class to write their responses to the PHOTO protocol. After completing their writing, students wrote captions for their photos and shared with their classmates through a “walk and talk” gallery experience looking at their classmates’ photos and captions for the associated prompt. Following the “walk and talk” experience, the students came back together for a discussion, sharing any additional observations and overall critical reflections of their professional identity in development. Following Reflection Activity 1, students shared feedback about the process and requested subsequent reflection activities utilize a new strategy (share one at a time at their desk) rather than in a “walk and talk” gallery.

Reflection Activities 2-4:

For reflection activities 2, 3, & 4, students analyzed their photos verbally rather than by completing a written reflection. This replaced the art “walk and talk.” Students passed their frames around the class as they reflected upon the PHOTO protocol one by one.

The second reflection took place near the end of the first semester, the third reflection took place during the first week after the Winter break, and the fourth took place toward the end of the Spring semester for a final reflection.

Table 2: Photovoice Reflection Prompts

Reflection 1: What does advanced generalist social work look like to me?
Reflection 2: What does self-care look like for an advanced MSW student?
Reflection 3: What motivates me?
Reflection 4: What connects me to my professional identity as a social worker?

Discussion

The initial goal was to explore how using Photovoice as a teaching strategy would help students process the development of their professional identity and enhance critical reflection of their internship experiences. Internship placements play an important role in the development of student professional identity, and using Photovoice as a teaching strategy helped to provide an innovative tool for advanced year MSW students to engage in critical reflection. For example, after the final reflection at the end of the year, students described Photovoice as a creative means to reflect on their experiences, values, and worldviews related to their professional identity. Additionally, several students noted their enthusiasm for the potential to implement Photovoice with future clients as a critical reflection strategy. While some students noted initially that they felt individual photographs could not capture the essence of social work entirely, they quickly realized at the end of the year that the collective gallery of photos provided a visual summary of their process in their advanced year. Student galleries demonstrated their connection to place, to people, to self, and to their future directions. For most students these were very personal artifacts representing their experience.

For programmatic purposes, at the end of the year the author rated all students on the nine program competencies and identified strengths and skills gained by each student over the course of the year. Competency nine, which states that students will be able to evaluate their own practice, was a high achieving standard for all ten students in this seminar. In the final reflection, students critically reflected on their own practice, what they gained throughout the year including lessons learned, and to what extent Photovoice enhanced the development of their professional identity. A key theme in the discussion revealed that Photovoice was a unique medium for them to reflect on their identity as social workers without focusing on specific tasks, roles, or scenarios from their internships. Because students were required to take pictures of objects and

places rather than people and faces, they often chose to take pictures of nature, the rural physical environment in which they live, the spiritual and cultural aspects of their lives that contribute to their understandings of advanced generalist practice, and most of all their commitment to cultural humility. In Carpenter & Platt's (1997) discussion of professional identity, future social workers reach this status as they begin to find a self-perceived sense of fit between professional and personal values. The final reflection of this seminar strongly indicated students had a clear sense of fit between professional and personal values.

Throughout the year the Photovoice activities offered a creative and alternative medium for students to critically reflect on the prompts. Even the shyest students became more open when they shared their photos and in general, dialogue in the class often referred back to the photographs even when they were not engaged in a Photovoice reflection. While the Photovoice reflection activities were meaningful and rich, there were some challenges with implementing the method as a teaching strategy. Because this was the first time Photovoice was incorporated as a teaching tool, the author/instructor decided to be flexible in that if students did not respond positively or were not engaged in the initial activity, we would not continue. Had the project been discontinued, the value for the frames and photo paper would have been lost and the class would have needed to identify replacement activities on scheduled dates. Thus, schedule flexibility was essential, which is not always an option in a busy semester with student learning agreements, case presentations, and other reflection assignments.

In another instance requiring flexibility, on one occasion, there were two students who did not submit photos due to time constraints, but still attended seminar. To ensure their participation for class that day, they were encouraged to reflect on the prompt without a photograph as well as provide insight and feedback for their classmates during the reflection. Finally, the Photovoice activities were believed to be successful because they were implemented with advanced year MSW students. Older and more experienced students understood the ethics behind taking pictures of objects and places rather than people and faces. It is possible in an undergraduate field seminar or foundation year graduate seminar, the discussion of ethics and confidentiality would need to be a lengthier conversation before any photography could take place.

Conclusion

In considering the *12 Grand Challenges for Social Work* (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2017), Photovoice as a teaching strategy for critical reflection fits the following: (1) Create social responses to a changing environment

and, (2) Harness technology for social good. Changes in our global environment are requiring future social workers to incorporate transformative social responses, including identifying innovations to strengthen individual and collective assets. Thus, incorporating this new teaching strategy provided an opportunity for critical reflection in seminar and also taught students a new skill they can utilize in the field. Additionally, learning through Photovoice allowed students to identify ways in which they may bring a wider array of help to more individuals and communities through a form of participatory action research (and critical reflection) that incorporates technology. In order to advance this teaching strategy, recommendations include structured and formalized scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) be conducted to fully pilot and understand the impact of Photovoice as a critical reflection strategy for students and their associated learning outcomes. Furthermore, future research is recommended in order to fully understand the relationship of Photovoice to the development of professional identity in social work students, particularly in their field seminars.

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