

**A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Using Photovoice Reflection Assignments to Build Cultural Competency**

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### **Introduction/Need for Innovation**

Technological breakthroughs in communication and travel have led to a smaller, multiculturally diverse world, and workforce demographic shifts reflect this change (Bowman, 2009). While the importance of multicultural education has been acknowledged by institutions of higher learning throughout the United States (Bowman, 2010; Denson et al., 2021; Mallinckrodt, et al., 2014; Mayhew & Grunwald, 2006; Zabala Eisshofer, 2022), the benefit of innovative teaching methods that take students out of their comfort zone should be examined in the transfer of knowledge among students in such coursework. As Mezirow (1991) notes, through critical reflection on prior knowledge and experience in the face of new experiences, individuals' worldviews may be changed through a process of disruptive and transformative learning. Through cognitive dissonance, students experience a change in thought processes wherein they form their own attitudes and opinions outside of their environmental worldview (i.e., those of their parents and what they experienced in their formative years (Mezirow, 1991). Banks (1994) asserted that diversity education increases critical thinking skills while broadening perspectives, which in turn positively affects both cognitive and personal growth. The American Association for Agricultural Education identified "Sufficient and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century" as an area of importance in its National Research Agenda (Roberts et al., 2016, p. 42). This agenda item seeks to understand what teaching methods and programs are most effective in preparing people to work in global agriculture. As students enter the workforce, acceptance of working in a culturally diverse world becomes paramount, and through multicultural coursework, students' cognitive horizons will expand, thus preparing them to thrive in an ever-changing society.

Photovoice reflections have been used as a method of qualitative data collection to represent the experiences of a population using photographs (Delgado & Wester, 2020). Innovative assignments such as *Photovoice Reflections* can give students a chance to capture first-hand new experiences and interactions, including with a culture different than their own. Many students' first real interaction with a culturally diverse population occurs upon entering college, as is likely their first experience in multicultural coursework (Bowman, 2012; Denson et al., 2021; Garvey et al., 2020). An assignment such as this pushes students out of their comfort zones, and into heterogeneous experiences not previously undertaken prior to taking said courses.

### **How it Works**

Students enrolled in *AGLE 2403 Agricultural Leadership In A Multicultural Society* and *AGED 5703 Cultural Competency for Working in Agricultural and Extension Education* at Oklahoma State University completed a photovoice reflection assignment. Students were required to attend an event or participate in an experience related to a group of people or topic area that was unfamiliar to them. Experiences included visiting international-themed food stores and restaurants, visiting an Amish community, attending a Native American Powwow, among others. During the experience, students were tasked with taking three to five cell phone-quality photos that captured the essence of the experience. Students completed a reflection paper about their experience and a presentation. In the papers and presentations, students described the event, why they were attracted to the photo, identified any course constructs that the photo evoked and

reflected on how the image illustrated their journey to becoming more culturally competent. For the graduate course, students were required to attend three experiences and a written report for each. The assignment for the undergraduate course was adapted to require one experience and an oral presentation.

### **Response to Innovation**

Student reflective essays overall noted positive experiences. Many mentioned that getting out of their comfort zone was somewhat disconcerting, but worth it. One student stated: “At first, I wasn’t too keen on this project because I like to stay in my shell and do things that I am comfortable with. But ... I was thankful for this opportunity to explore another culture.” Others expressed a measure of surprise at what they discovered. In reference to a Nepalese grocery store, a student commented: “I found it funny that they had frozen, microwavable food which I tend to associate as an American thing.” Another remarked of an Asian market: “In many movies and tv shows I’ve [sic] always seen the whole ducks or chicken always hanging in the windows of these shops. I was very surprised when I didn’t [sic] see them hanging in there.” While many of these preconceived notions triggered cognitive dissonance, others revealed that though cultures differed, similarities also existed: “In the end, I learned that when it comes to making money and being business savvy, Amish people are just like the rest of us and are just trying their best to make money with the skills that they have.” Students expressed transformed thinking through statements such as: “This helped me to realize that there are experiences I have that I [sic] subconsciously assume everyone shares, even though that is not remotely accurate” and “To be diversity conscious you must be willing to connect and have a friendship with others. It is about building a bridge to go to the other side to learn about other cultures.” Results support Mezirow’s (1991) assertion that preconceived ideals based on prior knowledge can be transformed through disruptive learning, resulting in a changed worldview. Further, Banks’ (1994) notion that improvement on both the cognitive and personal level through diversity experience was apparent, as well. Bowman (2009) posited that multicultural diversity courses serve to breakdown preconceived stereotypes by exposing students to cultures not previously experienced. Assignments such as *Photovoice Reflections* act to enhance this by entreating students to experience other cultures firsthand, affecting disruptive learning and cognitive change, as well as teaching students that though experiencing new things may initially be uncomfortable; doing so is often worthwhile in the end.

### **Resources/Advice to Others**

This assignment was born out of the desire to provide students enrolled in multicultural courses in agriculture the opportunity to experience and observe cultures different from what they are most familiar. Post-secondary programs should work to provide opportunities for students to participate in and reflect on experiences of other cultures. This innovation can expose students to many areas of diversity depending on the experiences they undertake. Instructors of multicultural courses should implement this innovation. When implementing, instructors should be ready to provide students with recommendations of opportunities available for students to attend. Students did incur time outside of class to complete the assignment and may have had travel costs. To alleviate travel costs, the instructors recommended several experiences on or near the Oklahoma State University campus for students to attend. The only cost associated with the innovation from the instructor’s perspective was the opportunity cost (time) associated with the development, delivery, and assessment of the assignment.

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