

“Students Learn How to Learn Outside the Classroom”: Using PhotoVoice to Evaluate Leadership Program Learning Outcomes

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Introduction

The proliferation of smartphones with quality cameras has turned everyone into a photographer and changed communication and sharing of information. According to the Pew Research Center (2024), 97% of Americans ages 18-29 own a smartphone, meaning these individuals have easy access to cameras, photo-related apps, and photo storage. For higher education, students' access to cameras creates an opportunity to innovate how we structure our course assignments, including visual and written assignments and reflections. This also provides opportunities to assess learning outcomes more robustly without asking students to complete yet another survey.

PhotoVoice is a research strategy commonly associated with participatory action research practices in which research participants use photos to represent and describe their experiences and surroundings (Horowitz, 2012). PhotoVoice is defined as photos “voicing *our individual and collective experience* (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 381). While traditional research and educational practices involve collecting words from participants and students, PhotoVoice connects the words to pictures. It fosters critical and reflective thinking and may appeal to diverse learners (Horowitz, 2012; Procter, 2020). The process has been used in higher education to impart critical reflection practices for pre-service teachers (Horowitz, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2017); introductory courses for first-year university students (Procter, 2020); and to determine challenges with admissions and decision-making related to higher education (Martinez-Vargas et al., 2019).

How it Works

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the evaluation of learning outcomes for the Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications (ALEC) program is embedded within a capstone course. The capstone course includes various reflection assignments that attempt to gather information from the participants on the degree to which they understand and apply the five learning outcomes of the ALEC major. In the fall semester of 2023, the capstone course used PhotoVoice as part of an assignment to collect evaluation data to measure the program learning outcomes. Of the 34 total students enrolled in the course, 20 gave permission to use their responses as part of this project.

In the reflection assignment, students were asked to select five photos, each representing one of the five program learning outcomes. For each photo, students were asked to answer a set of five questions, modified from Horowitz (2012) PHOTO reflection questions, designed for use with PhotoVoice, to be more applicable to the leadership course content. The assignment reflection questions included (1) Describe your **P**icture. (2) What is **H**appening in your picture? (3) Why did you take a picture **O**f this? (4) What does this picture **T**ell us about your role as an ALEC student or employee in an ALEC-related career?, and (5) How can this picture provide **O**pportunities to increase the knowledge and understanding of ALEC as a major field of study? The photos and reflections were analyzed deductively for connection to the learning outcomes and inductively for shared themes and experiences described in the reflection assignment.

Results to Date

PhotoVoice assignments for the program learning outcomes described experiences that fit into seven themes. An “other” category was also created to account for the experiences that did not include a specific activity participated in by the student but instead were a different aspect of lived experience. Table 1 presents the themes and their definitions as well as the learning

outcomes the theme was reported within. While the original concept of the reflection was to connect to experiences associated with classes, the reflections included a wide range of answers, and more of how the students applied their knowledge to other aspects of their lives.

Table 1

Experiences Connected to Program Learning Outcomes in PhotoVoice Assignment

Theme	Description	Learning Outcomes Theme is Reported In
Class	Pictures of the classroom, textbook, or other class materials.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Internship	Pictures from paid or unpaid internships.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Higher Education Organization/Club	Pictures of events or meets associated with an organization or club through a higher education institution.	1, 3, 4, 5
4-H or FFA	Pictures of events or opportunities as members or volunteers with 4-H or FFA. 4-H is a national youth development organization that provides opportunities for youth in the areas of Leadership, Healthy Living and STEM. FFA is a national youth organization that promotes leadership in the context of food and agriculture (formerly known as the Future Farmers of America prior to 1988).	1, 3, 5
Professional Development	Pictures from workshops, conferences, or other professional development opportunities.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Job	Pictures from employment, either part-time or full-time.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Study Abroad	Pictures from their college studies in a foreign country.	2, 3
Other	Pictures with personal meaning and not necessarily an experience. Pictures fell into categories of Friendship, Hobby, Nature, and Religion.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Future Plans/Advice to Others

In using PhotoVoice, we discovered that students, when asked to reflect on classes, consider their lived experience holistically and do not necessarily separate class work from club and work experiences. Knowing that out-of-class experiences are predominant in student thoughts provides an opportunity for instructors. Can real-life examples related to club experiences be used for case studies and classroom discussion instead of simulated examples? Will students be more likely to connect classroom theories to practices if the practices are related to specific, current student activities? These questions remain areas for further exploration in future semesters. We encourage other instructors to reflect on their assignments and consider the various opportunities for reflective photo use. Students live in a multimedia environment. Connecting coursework to visual platforms may help students make connections outside the classroom and provide critical thinking and reflective skills used in other areas of their lives.

Costs/Resources Needed

While PhotoVoice requires the use of a camera, most students already have smartphones with cameras. The ability to download photos is included in most online learning platforms, as well. Therefore, all that is needed is the innovation to design the PhotoVoice assignment appropriately.

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