

## **Using Visual Ethnography to Frame Student Perceptions of Agricultural Leadership, Communication, and Education during a Study-Away Experience**

### **Introduction / Need for Research**

As agricultural education continues to evolve alongside the industry it serves, experiential learning remains one of its most powerful pedagogical tools. However, while study-abroad programs are well documented in literature, domestic study-away experiences are often overlooked despite their accessibility and potential for transformative learning (Northfell & Edgar, 2014). The need for this research stems from increasing demands on agricultural educators to think contextually, communicate clearly, and adapt lessons across formal and non-formal settings. Understanding how students internalize experiences through travel-based learning can inform future program design and curricular integration. For this study, visual ethnography guided students through reflective learning with the production of “photographs or video, as visual texts, as well as the experience of producing and discussing them, to become part of their ethnographic knowledge” (Pink, 2008, p. 10). This project reports on how a faculty-led travel course shaped college students’ perceptions of leadership, communication, and educational delivery within agricultural systems using a visual ethnography approach.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which describes learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students’ travel experiences provided the foundation for critical thinking and insight. To deepen engagement, the project used visual methods and reflective writing, aligning with qualitative approaches that emphasize contextual interpretation and meaning-making (Creswell, 2014). Visual ethnography relies upon methods such as photography, video and sketching “to gather data and express the reality of a group of people... and their activities in natural situations” (Pink, 2008, p. 21). This approach was employed by students during the trip to internalize their perceptions of leadership, communication, and education in unfamiliar settings. Additionally, a SWOT analysis framework was applied to assess strengths, challenges, opportunities, and constraints in images (Gurel & Tat, 2017). Together, these frameworks enabled students to document what they encountered and interpret how meaning was constructed through observation and comparison.

### **Methodology**

Participants included 13 college students enrolled in a senior-level agricultural education course. During the semester, students participated in a five-day immersive travel experience in and around [city], [state]. Site visits were strategically selected to expose students to varied expressions of leadership, communication, and educational practices, including the [state] Department of Agriculture, Farm Bureau, County Extension office, CAT Holt, and several locations tied to the [city] Livestock Show and Rodeo. Data sources included structured reflection essays and over 100 coded photographs submitted by students. Tropy, a research photo archival program, was used for organization. Each photo was tagged by its author according to a primary learning objective (Leadership, Communication, or Formal/Non-Formal Education),

then supported by open-ended coding using a SWOT analysis. Reflection essays were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in perception, values expressed, and comparisons drawn between students' home contexts and those observed in [state]. Rather than measuring content mastery, the study aimed to understand how students interpreted their experiences and connected them to broader contexts.

### **Results / Findings**

Student reflections indicated a multi-layered engagement with the trip's learning objectives. Leadership was frequently described as visible, relational, and community driven. At sites like the Department of Agriculture and the [state] Farm Bureau, students noted the intentionality of workforce development, professional mentorship, and strategic planning. In contrast, youth engagement revealed how early leadership cultivation shapes identity and agency. Communication was described as both direct and contextual. Students discussed clear messaging in policy statements and outreach efforts at agricultural organizations. They also reflected on nonverbal forms of communication including tone, signage, gesture, and hospitality, which shaped their impressions just as strongly. These observations were often contrasted with communication practices back home, revealing a critical awareness of cultural and contextual differences in audience engagement. In terms of education, students expressed a broadened understanding of how agricultural learning can be delivered across settings. Many found the scale and specialization of programs like the urban-focused magnet high school to be both impressive and aspirational. Informal learning experiences challenged students' assumptions about where and how education takes place. Students connected these insights to their future roles, often suggesting ways to integrate what they observed into their own communities.

### **Conclusions**

This study demonstrates that when thoughtfully designed, study-away programs offer rich ground for student learning across core competencies in agricultural education. The use of photo coding and narrative reflection supported thoughtful engagement with the educational and cultural complexity of the trip. Through guided reflection and visual analysis, students engaged deeply with leadership structures, communication models, and educational formats. Their reflections conveyed not only information absorption but also critical thought, value clarification, and contextual awareness. The act of coding photos within a SWOT framework helped students re-engage their experiences and translate them into transferable insights.

### **Implications / Recommendations**

Instructors and program designers should consider the layered benefits of combining experiential learning with structured, student-driven reflection. Visual ethnography can support both qualitative assessment and learner empowerment. The integration of coded media and narrative reflection offers a framework for connecting classroom objectives to real-world observation. Future iterations of this work may include interviews or pre/post reflective prompts to track student growth more formally, or comparative studies with international programs. As the field continues to prepare educators and communicators for adaptive, place-based leadership, these approaches offer both practical insight and personal transformation.

### References

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