

Show and Tell: Photovoice as International Travel Pedagogy

Sheryl Tuttle Ross

Introduction

The appeal of international travel has long attracted college students to spend time away from their home campuses. From semesters or years spent studying abroad in France, Spain or China to spring break weeks spent in Jamaica or Mexico, wanderlust is part of the college experience. The educational value of each trip varies and depends crucially on the quality of activities engaging the students. Teachers who use an appropriate pedagogy may make the difference between students who develop cultural competencies and those who simply enjoy bacchanalian vacations. In this paper, I suggest that photovoice projects enhance short-term, faculty-led study tours so that students gain knowledge that is beyond the tourist's checklist. Students embarking on a photovoice project distribute cameras (either disposable or digital) to locals of the area they are traveling, with questions that the photographers should address when they are taking their pictures.¹ The students develop or download the images, and then ask the photographers to explain the story behind the photos or how it is that the photos address the question set forth by the students. By engaging with a local population, photovoice creates an experience that moves toward seeing the world through another's eyes. To illustrate the value of photovoice, I provide a sample of a photovoice project that occurred during a short-term, faculty-led study tour to Tanzania, January 2009.

What is Photovoice?

Visual anthropology has existed almost as long as the camera itself. During the Great Depression, among the many public works projects, was the photo-documenting of the conditions that existed within the nation.² While traditional visual anthropology relies on the social scientists to take the photos, this practice is not without controversy as the power of representation lies with the researcher, and the subject of the photographs risks being objectified. Photovoice shares with visual anthropology documenting conditions through the photographic image; however, the term “photovoice” refers to participatory photography—where the typically photographed become the photographers.³

The photovoice concept has two loci of origin, one in the United States where Caroline Wang developed the technique (first calling it photo novella) as “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique.”⁴ The other in the United Kingdom, where PhotoVoice (with a capital “V”) is a charitable foundation whose mission “is to build skills within disadvantaged and marginalised communities using innovative participatory photography and digital storytelling methods so that they have the opportunity to represent themselves and create tools for advocacy and communications to achieve positive social change”⁵ The founders of the charity, Tiffany Fairey and Anna Blackman, formed their organization while they were attending Edinburgh University. In 1998, “they established projects in Vietnam (Street Vision) and Nepal (Children’s Forum) which were to become the cornerstones of the present-day organization”⁶ The general research method as developed by Wang as well as PhotoVoice charity emphasize the power of photography to influence public policy. In fact, one of the requirements for projects under the rubric PhotoVoice charity is that they are on-going and oriented toward public policy changes. Nevertheless the methodology can serve multiple purposes. As the website indicates, “each and every participatory photography project is implemented with its own specific aims and objectives and these can range from artistic, educational,

therapeutic, research-related community development, policy change or a means of social activism.”⁷ In order to explore the value of photovoice for short-term, faculty led international travel, I will first consider photovoice as pedagogy more generally which has as its primary goal for students to develop a deeper understanding of how a specific population conceptualizes the world.

Photovoice as Pedagogy

Images powerfully convey information. They have the ability to transcend linguistic and cultural differences to create a shared experience. Students are often far more fluent and familiar with photographic images and narrative films than they are with the written word, as students frequently struggle with the texts of Shakespeare, but can ascertain salient features and some symbolic importance of photographic images or movies.⁸ Moreover, the photographic image has become ubiquitous, as cell phones cameras and Facebook make sharing visual images the norm for most students. Professors can harness the power of the photographic image and student’s intimate familiarity with the medium as part of a critical pedagogy. However, photovoice is not simply looking at pictures, but it also involves hearing the stories behind each shot. It treats the photographer as intentionally engaging in depicting the world; that is, photographers, as cultural ambassadors, have a say in what is represented, how it is represented, and why it is culturally important. Both the showing and the telling provide critical information on what it is like to be of another culture.

Wang and Burris list as their theoretical underpinnings the work of Paulo Freire whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has challenged many assumptions about the nature of teaching. No longer is teaching viewed merely as filling an empty vessel with knowledge, but rather teaching requires building upon student’s knowledge acquired through lived experience.⁹ Education toward a critical consciousness means a rejection of merely adopting the so-called knowledge of our forefathers. Treating all humans as knowledgeable and as legitimate sources of knowledge is one mark of critical pedagogy. The photographers have something to show and tell about their culture. Photovoice turns on its head the notion of student/teacher as well as object/subject~ the photographers as teachers transfers the relationship from one who is represented or objectified to one who represents and in so doing expresses agency. This mirrors what Freire claims the student/teacher relationship should be. “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously students and teachers”¹⁰

Photovoice requires a certain amount of humility—for it assumes that the student travelers do not know the subjects, but want to learn and are willing to be challenged and changed as a result of the encounter. The student travelers are participating in discovering and creating knowledge in concert with those who photograph and document their answers to open questions. One might think of this process as phenomenological sharing. That is, how one sees and experiences the world is narrated and pictured and shared with others. The photographer’s stories are equally important to the acquisition of knowledge, for frequently the story behind the choice of photograph directs the viewer’s attention to unanticipated answers to the photographic prompts. This process involves examining the traveler’s assumptions and revising them based on what they see and what they hear. Freire echoes this process as he writes, “Education makes sense because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing, of knowing that they know and knowing that they don’t”¹¹

How to Photovoice

Photovoice projects can be introduced in a large variety of settings, and need not be limited to international travel experiences. For example, Damian Hanft developed a project for his “Diversities in Service Industry” course at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The main idea was instead of teaching about diversity from some textbook understanding of the term “diversity,” the students would ask those who actually work in the service industry how they experience diversity or what “diversity” means for them. The students selected workers in various service industries (e.g. hotels and restaurants,) gave them cameras, and instructed them to take pictures that represented how they experience diversity in the workplace. The students developed the photographs

and met with the workers to talk about how the pictures they took address this issue of diversity. This is an important conversation to have as the students were training to become leaders in the service industry. The students returned to the classroom with a deeper understanding of diversity, and were surprised to learn about the various effects of the Americans with Disabilities laws and how it impacts working conditions in various service industries.¹² Whether the projects occur internationally or stateside, there are several steps to enacting this pedagogy.

Step One: Define the Assignment and Organize the Project

Most students are accustomed to being assigned papers or exams—photovoice is likely to be a new experience for them. In order to introduce this pedagogy to students, it is useful to figure out what the final product will look like—a PowerPoint presentation to the class or poster session at a local library? There are many ways to make public the results of a photovoice project, such as an exhibition at a local coffee shop or even placing photos in the windows of downtown businesses.¹³ If photovoice is a part of a credit bearing course, then what portion of the grade will it comprise? How will it be evaluated? How does it relate to the other course material? There are also nuts and bolts sorts of decisions as whether the photographers will use disposable cameras or cheap digital ones? Will the images need to be developed or uploaded to a computer? Will the interview process involve taped conversations or will the students transcribe notes during the conversations? It may be necessary to break up larger classes into subsections as Wang suggests that “To allow for practical ease and in-depth discussion, seven to ten people is the ideal group size.”¹⁴ If the photovoice project is part of a faculty-led, short-term study abroad tour, then the scheduling of activities needs to include time for the distribution of the cameras, development of the photos, and the ensuing conversation with the photographers—portions of at least two or three days should be set aside for this endeavor.

Step Two: Recruit Photovoice Photographers

Students participating in local projects may need no assistance in finding willing photographers depending upon the nature of the assignment. The students themselves cannot be the photographers as the point of this exercise is to get the perspective from someone who has the lived experience of the area. Conversations regarding the ethical treatment of all participants and the informed consent of those who are photographed (and the parents in case of photographed children) as well as the photographers are necessary for projects to go forward. The students should anticipate what sorts of photographs might be taken to address the theme selected for the project. This gives the students access to the assumptions that are brought to bear on the theme itself, so that they can become familiar with the difference between their perspective and how that may differ from other’s perspectives. So in the example above, many of the students predicted that there would be many photos featuring faces of different races. Recognizing that this is their pre-conception of diversity is an important part of identifying how their conception of diversity has changed as a result of this photovoice exercise.

Faculty leading international study tours should arrange for the photovoice project while making other tour arrangements. Many universities have formal arrangements with universities abroad. These partner universities have faculty who may be able to recruit photographers within the target population, and if the traveling students are not fluent in the language, the international faculty may be willing to translate or find translators of the informed consent documents as well as the narrations of the photos.

Step Three: Distribute Cameras and Themes

The students should give the photographers cameras and basic training on how to take pictures. The training includes the basic point, look through viewfinder and shoot, reminding the photographers to keep their figures away from the lens. The training also should include a conversation about the acceptable ways to approach a potential subject of a photo, the audience who might view the photo, the implications of being photographed, and when or why someone might not want to be photographed.¹⁵ Care should be taken not to describe the

kinds of pictures that should be taken, but rather to allow the photographers to interpret the theme. The theme or the question should be open ended enough so that the audience could be surprised at the subjects chosen by the photographers.

Step Four: Develop, Share and Discuss Photos

Some of the aspects of this step are contingent on the technology chosen for the project. If disposable cameras are used, then the film needs to be developed with two copies of each picture—one for the photographer, and the other for the student to keep. The images may be shared via blog or flash drives, depending upon the technology that the photographers possess. A conversation about the photos should proceed by having the photographers select their favorite photos, then asking them to describe how the photos address the theme. Follow up questions posed in order to extend the conversation should be mindful—the students should not view themselves as “doing the photographers a favor” but instead they should view themselves as fortunate to be able to have this opportunity to experience the culture on a deeper level. Many tourists have taken pictures, for example, of the Eiffel Tower, but comparatively fewer students have seen how a French person answers this question: What is uniquely French? The student is not doing the French person a favor but rather the photographer is the generous one.

Step Five: Compare Assumptions with Results

In the second step, students were asked to anticipate what sorts of photos would be taken by the photographers in response to the given theme or question. This step invites the students to compare their assumptions about how to answer the question (such as, what does diversity look like?) with the results obtained by the execution of the project—the actual showing of the pictures, and the actual telling why they were taken. For example, none of the UW Stout students predicted that there would be photos of sinks that are equipped so that those in wheelchairs can use them. Socratic knowledge is often described as knowing what one does not know. Students will have a guess at what photos will be taken in response to the specific photovoice prompt, but often those guesses are just an imposition of stereotypes. Photovoice projects offer the opportunity to become acquainted with what students thought they knew. The conventional understanding of diversity involves many different faces of different races—that there is more to the concept of diversity was understood by the students through the photovoice project. There is an element of surprise with the photos and the stories that rewards contemplation, and the potential to revise one’s assumptions based on the results of the inquiry—the process of discussing the pictures with the photographers. This step is the most crucial for students as they can come closer to seeing the world through another’s eyes when they can distinguish what their assumptions about what would happen from what is really documented.¹⁶ One way to get at this information is to ask the students “what surprised you about the photos or the stories?”

Step Six: Summarize and Present Findings

As a result of the images and the stories that are shared, students codify their themes, issues and theories related to the topic.¹⁷ The findings are shared in a manner consistent with the teacher’s assignment at the outset, be it a poster, paper or other presentation. There may be many components to this step which allows for both individual and group evaluations. That is, there may be a group presentation for a general audience (such as a Rotary Club) or an individual reflection paper. Students may be invited to think about how this approach compares with other assignments in the classroom so that there are two levels of analysis occurring, one about the themes and the other about the process or a meta-analysis.

The next section shows and tells one example of a photovoice project which occurred during a faculty-led, short-term study tour to Tanzania. The results consist not only of the pictures and photographer’s stories, but also of the reflections of the faculty and students who organized the project. The purpose here is to demonstrate the process as well as the product.

Photovoice: January Term Tanzania 2009

In January 2009, a faculty led study tour to Tanzania was arranged as an investigation into eco-tourism and an opportunity for service-learning by a philosophy professor and a professor of economics. Students could earn course work credit, participate in independent research projects or simply engage in a service learning experience. There were seventeen students traveling on the tour with six participating in the photovoice project.¹⁸ The project was framed as a group research project. Since many of the student researchers were pre-med majors, and since photovoice began as a way to document community health needs, this project was designed to give the pre-med majors a chance to witness what a community's health needs are. We had service learning projects arranged at an orphanage which was connected to a hospital and a local school.

The photographers were Tanzanian students, teachers and health care professionals. We had asked them to take pictures that represent what "health" and "disease" means to them, and what a typical day looks like. We used thirty five disposable cameras, distributing them on one afternoon, collecting them to get developed on another afternoon, and returning to have the follow up conversation on a third afternoon. The instructions and the informed consent forms were translated into Swahili, and we had several people who were fluent in both English and Swahili to assist with collecting the stories associated with each picture. The photographers identified themselves with their first names, and the first picture of each camera was of the photographer, so that we could identify the developed film with its owner. We distributed the disposable cameras the day we arrived in Arusha, picked up the cameras a week later in order to develop the film at a one-hour photo store, then returned with two copies of the pictures for the interviews. We recorded the interviews on hand-held digital sound devices, and eventually transferred the images to a digital format. Each researcher saw and heard from five photographers, and we had several follow up meetings to share notes and compare results. In order to share the results of this project more broadly, we composed a PowerPoint presentation for the Rotary Club and arranged for prints to be displayed at a local coffee shop and also at an art-gallery. Keeping in line with the charitable aims of some photovoice projects, proceeds from all of the photos sold from the art gallery and coffee shop were given to the Tanzanian orphanage and medical center whose participation made the project possible.

Prior to engaging in this project, we anticipated (faculty and the students) seeing faces of starvation and desperate need. Mariah Conway recounts "I was expecting to see and hear about poverty, homelessness, sadness and continual struggles."¹⁹ When Jack Temple first saw the developed pictures he was disappointed. He wondered aloud if "we were not clear enough in our instructions."²⁰ Jack did not believe that this project would serve as a community health needs assessment as there were none of the typical pictures associated with charity drives, such as Oxfam or Unicef. Moreover, none of the pictures documented what seemed like gaping needs we saw first-hand when we toured the hospital the day before. Jack reevaluated the project's success after the photographers told their stories about the pictures.

Temple explains "practically all of the people took pictures of the chores they perform at home. These include walking a few miles to get water for the family, tending to agriculture, and a variety of other jobs. When I told the participants they work very hard, they respond by saying that this is not hard work; it is simply what they do every day. It is their life. It made me realize that we all have different definitions of work and different thresholds for labor. What I consider to be difficult may be an afterthought to someone in rural Tanzania."²¹ Conway sums up the results of the project by explaining "I feel as though you gain a deeper understanding of the culture by letting the participants become the storytellers...that is, they control the content not the leading questions of the researcher."²²

What We Saw and Heard



Milking the Cow

Kamtate (one of the photovoice participants who received a camera, and chose to be the subject of this photo,) is dressed in her finest clothes milking the cow her family owns.²³ She shows us an activity she does each morning which she took to represent “health” and a daily activity. The students were surprised to see this sort of picture but after she told them that this picture represents health for her as the cow is well-nourished and provides food for the family. Conway reflects, “I heard about how each individual was proud and how much each individual loved the life they live.”²⁴



Collecting the Water

When this student, Geoffrey, wakes up, he walks three kilometers each way to fetch water for the family.²⁵ Jack Temple recalls “He showed me a picture of him kneeling down in a murky stream with a bucket. He told me that he walks very far and even still the water is not good, but this is all they have.”²⁶ Geoffrey wishes that his house had clean running water or at least that the stream itself was cleaner, and this picture represents a need that he and his family have that is not fulfilled. He also recognized that without any water his family would surely perish.²⁷



Rock Punishment

When Geoffrey returns with the water, he walks another six kilometers to school.²⁸ Part of photovoice's potential is that the pictures can relate to another to tell a more complete story. For example, one picture may represent a beginning action, and another the consequences of that action. We saw Geoffrey fetching water before, and now we see the next part of his day. In this picture he was 15 minutes late for class. "He was required to hold these two stones over his shoulders for one hour in order learn that tardiness was not tolerated."²⁹ Heather Burgos explains "he missed the lesson for the day."³⁰ That is, instead of hearing what the teacher had to say, he and his friend were required to face the punishment. Mariah Conway remembers it as it "seems such a harsh punishment for such a minor offense."³¹ Geoffrey saw this as healthy because it showed that the teachers were strict and therefore good teachers.³²



Studying By Candlelight

Godlove shows how he studies each night. He said that once the oil in the candle was spent, that he had to stop studying, and he thought that was not fair, because he wanted to study more.³³ Sheila Oberreuter reflects "the results that surprised me the most was the passion the students had for their education. They wanted to learn so they could earn a better life for themselves. They knew the quality of their education was not even with other people of the world."³⁴ This struck us as different from our experiences in the United States where a parent nagging their children to complete their homework is a common sight. Godlove is proud of how studious he is, and has his sights set on studying abroad when he completes his secondary education.³⁵ Although this picture

depicts a rather sparse scene, Godlove's pride in his scholarship is evident, so that there is more revealed by the story behind the picture than what the image can convey.



Seeing Where There is Not

Godlove takes a picture of a field by his school. He explains that this is supposed to be the school's soccer field, but it is difficult to play because the field is so poorly kept, "there are many rocks and it is difficult to place goals."³⁶ At first this looked like just a scenery picture, but by speaking with Godlove we could see where there is not; we could see in a way that might be thought of as a structured absence. That is, we could see the absence of a soccer field, once Godlove told us that it was supposed to be there. Richard Swatek suggests "it is as if the story behind this picture represents a dream."³⁷ In addition, we could see how a passion for sports transcended this particular cultural boundary.

What is the real-value of short-term study abroad programs?

For students who attend smaller Midwestern universities, where there is a largely homogeneous student body and faculty, the very act of becoming a foreigner, even if only for a short time is valuable. The phenomenology (or the awareness of the particulars of the experience) opens the students; it makes them aware of what exactly they are taking for granted. Moreover, they are no longer treated as just an individual, but as member of a group, and an object of fascination in some cases. One of the problems of introducing our students to international diversity is their mistaking cultural stereotypes and icons for cultural knowledge. Students who have been educated with what Friere would consider the banking model of education are not used to thinking of themselves as objects of fascination or any other curiosity. In addition, if we were to translate this banking model of education to a mode of traveling, a student traveler might simply tick off "must-see" monuments and mistake that for "real" knowledge of the country. However, a photovoice project can change that educational experience for students. By becoming an object of fascination and by seeing the world through another's eyes, students can move beyond the stereotypes, and toward a cultural competency necessary for this era of globalization.

Photovoice projects have the potential to transform the experience of becoming a foreigner into a genuine photo-conversation with another from a very different culture in order to more fully comprehend the similarities and the differences in how the world is conceptualized. I think such conversations are a useful starting place for students to understand this human experience.³⁸

Endnotes

¹The photographers are not professional photographers, but rather ordinary people. I use the word "photographer" here to simply mean one who takes pictures.

²John Collier Jr and Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as Research Method* (University of New Mexico Press,

1986).

³Caroline Wang, et al, "Photovoice as participatory health promotion strategy," in *Health Promotion International*, vol.13 (1), (1998).

⁴Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, "Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment," in *Health Education and Behavior*, Vol. 24 (3) (June 1997): 369-387.

⁵<http://www.photovoice.org/about/> accessed 8/17/11

⁶<http://www.photovoice.org/about/> accessed 8/17/11

⁷<http://www.photovoice.org/whatwedo/info/background-to-the-field> accessed 8/27/11

⁸Raychel Haugrud Reiff. "Shakespeare: To See or Not to See—Does Watching Videos Help Students Better Understand Shakespeare?," Poster Session, University of Wisconsin System 2010 President's Summit on Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Madison, WI, April 2010.

⁹Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2004), p. 15.

¹²Damien Hanft. "Lessons learned using photovoice as a participatory-action research classroom technique," Poster Session, University of Wisconsin System 2010 President's Summit on Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Madison, WI April 2010.

¹³Such as occurred in St. Paul Minnesota with Photovoice for Ethiopian Immigrants in Minnesota, Spring 2007.

¹⁴Caroline Wang, *Photovoice: A Participatory Action Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health*, p. 187.

¹⁵*Ibid.*,

¹⁶Heather Castleden, Theresa Garvin, Huu-ay-aht First Nation, "Modifying Photovoice for community-based participatory Indigenous research," *Social Science & Medicine* 66 (January 2008).

¹⁷<http://www.comminit.com/global/node/201294> accessed 9/9/2011

¹⁸The students were: Jack Temple, Richard Swatek, Mariah, Conway, Heather Burgos, Sheila Oberreuter, and Anne Temple.

¹⁹Email to author, dated February 10, 2010

²⁰Personal conversation, dated January 15, 2009

²¹Email to author, dated February 4, 2010

²²Email to author, dated February 10, 2010

²³Recorded personal conversation, dated January 16, 2009

²⁴Email to author, dated February 10, 2010

²⁵Recorded personal conversation, dated January 16, 2009

²⁶Email to author, dated November 28, 2009

²⁷Recorded personal conversation, dated January 16, 2009

²⁸Recorded personal conversation, dated January 16, 2009

²⁹Email to author dated December 12, 2009

³⁰Email to author dated December 12, 2009

³¹Email to author dated February 10, 2010

³²Recorded conversation dated January 16, 2009

³³Recorded conversation dated January 16, 2009

³⁴Email dated December 1, 2009

³⁵Recorded conversation dated January 16, 2009

³⁶Recorded conversation dated January 16, 2009

³⁷Email to author dated December 17, 2009

³⁸Acknowledgements redacted for blind review

Address Correspondences to:

Sheryl Tuttle Ross

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

La Crosse, WI

e-mail: sross@uwlax.edu