



Photovoice as a Tool to Foster the Global Skills of Candidate Teachers

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Abstract

This article offers reflection on the procedures and outcomes of Photovoice workshop which was organized at Matej Bel University (MBU), Slovakia with selected diaspora communities in Banská Bystrica. The workshop was conducted in cooperation with the University of Delaware (Delaware, USA) and Dickinson college (Pennsylvania, USA). These institutions were the main initiators and leaders of the Photovoice project, in close cooperation with the Idaho Museum of International Diaspora (Idaho, USA). The decision was later made to implement the Photovoice method as part of ELT methodology courses at the Department of English and American Studies in order to integrate more innovative and active participatory techniques in candidate-teacher education. It was hoped that these techniques would trigger students' global skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity, as well as other key 21st century competencies. The workshops were carried out at the end of the summer term of the academic year 2022/2023 with the Ukrainian student cohort studying at Matej Bel University, and with Ukrainian professors teaching or conducting research at MBU. In this article we focus solely on the cohort of Ukrainian students and the opinions they gave us regarding the Photovoice method and its possible use with their learners during their teaching practice. The Photovoice workshop proved effective in enhancing participants' global skills, which was viewed via participants' reflections on their experience in the workshop. In light of the project's success, there is potential to showcase the products which workshop participants created locally, nationally, and globally through exhibitions and online platforms. The study is the outcome of the research project KEGA 016UMB-4/2021 Global skills and their implementation in foreign language teaching in secondary schools as a means of developing students' key competences and the professional identity of future teachers in the context of the 21st century.

Keywords: PhotoVoice, global skills, Global Cultures and Global Diaspora Curriculum, Ukrainian students.

Introduction

The 21st century teacher should be able to adapt flexibly in the classroom. Such a 21st century teacher is able to lead genuine communication with his/her learners, collaborate with them, and learn in the process. These skills are developed through early teacher training (practicum at middle and high schools) and during teachers' first years in teaching profession. Higher education (HE) institutions today are expected to reflect on the essential skills which trainee teachers will need to have gained by the end of their studies. In this article we focus on experiential methods which can increase students' motivation, higher-level thinking skills, and creativity, as opposed to more traditional teaching methods. Experiential learning also develops soft skills (empathy, active listening, teamwork, self-reflection, etc.) and other social skills. Specifically, this study explores the value and benefits of using the Photovoice (initially qualitative research) method and how it reflects the Kolbs' Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) [6] which consists of 4 elements, namely Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation. Photovoice resembles a kind of experiential learning (active learning strategy) and therefore we classified it into the category of experiential methods. When using experiential methods in teaching, the students are not just passive listeners, taking notes and only having a sporadic opportunity to give their opinion, but instead are active agents in the learning process. During ELT methodology classes (lectures, seminars, practicum lessons) students from Faculty of Arts (Matej Bel University, MBU) are taught to plan their lessons logically, coherently and creatively and to be flexible should a problem unexpectedly arise during the lesson, all in line with globally, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy.

The Photovoice Method in Teacher Training Education



The Photovoice method has never been used in the Department of English and American Studies (MBU) before. It attracted the author's attention due to its benefits for communities and for individuals, and because of its experiential character — all of which are beneficial factors in the foreign language classroom.

“Photovoice is an innovative way to reflect, talk, learn, share, and make a difference for one's self and others; a straightforward method fostering patient, family, and community dialog. Photovoice puts cameras in the hands of people with valuable lived experience so they can explore and share their perspectives on health, family, community, and their futures.” [4]

Using photovoice, teachers or other instructors can encourage discussion, investigate experiences, highlight social-justice issues, collaborate for change, identify needs, and more. This can support communicative language teaching in the classroom, while also developing learners' global skills. Implementation of the Photovoice method is begun with students learning about Photovoice, taking and discussing photographs and reflecting on their experience (fostering their visual literacy), writing captions (genre is not limited) about the selected photographs taken, options to choose photos for sharing, options to invite people to share in discussion, option to present and exhibit. [4]

There is a hope that Photovoice can be used as a platform or tool for people coming from different cultural backgrounds...people of different views, perspectives and opinions to reveal and open up their stories, their life journeys, stories can be shown...it has potential to facilitate cross-cultural learning, understanding and respect as well as to create opportunities to celebrate individual stories via produced images in the context of our beautiful global culture. [3]

Photovoice method can be used effectively in education in order to support learners' global skills which include communication and collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, intercultural competence and knowledge of citizenship, emotional self-regulation and wellbeing, and digital literacies [5]. The decision to implement Photovoice workshop as part of teacher training programs is aligned with the university's public diplomacy project titled Internationalizing Global Cultures and Diaspora Curriculum (IGCDC). The purpose of this public diplomacy project is to advance a global cultures and diaspora curriculum program through combined experiences and expertise of the IGCDC faculty – a core group of multidisciplinary experts from academia, cultural organizations, public and government sectors, and U.S.-based non-profit organizations. The IGCDC curriculum was conceived and designed by Idaho Museum of International's Diaspora executive director and founder, Dr. Palina Louangketh, from Idaho, USA, whose vision is spread her curriculum worldwide in order to inspire transformational change in society (IMID, 2023). In this article we reflect upon the experiences of Ukrainian students who came to Slovakia because of war. The human journey story and lived experience of diasporas worldwide serve as a foundation for creating this special curriculum program. This interconnection between diasporas and the broader community fosters a peaceful and compassionate relationship for future generations to model after. Photovoice as part of IGCDC offers pre-service and in-service teachers with a number of possibilities to foster both students' productive and receptive skills alongside the 4Cs (creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration).

Photovoice Method and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

The Photovoice method reminds us of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) [6] which consists of 4 elements, namely Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. All four elements resemble the learning process which happens while applying the Photovoice method in the classroom.

The first stage (concrete experience) builds on the hands-on experiences of learners. In our case the learners were Ukrainian candidate teachers who were learning to work with the Photovoice method through their own experience. During this stage, the students learnt new skills, use the cameras to take pictures and develop photos, displaying the photos on the screen and printing them. The second stage (reflective observations) involved discussing the selected images with peers, creating a caption about the image, sharing feelings about the image, asking questions, learning from each other's experiences and opinions. Through experience, the students' learning began. The Ukrainian candidate teachers in our case reflected on what elements of Photovoice methods could be used in



their classrooms and for what purposes. The third stage (abstract conceptualization) fostered candidate teachers' competence in taking action, going beyond their own experiences and integrating photovoice methods into their lesson plans and future projects. The last and fourth stage (active experimentation) put the candidate teachers' experience to the test in the real world as they took what they have learnt during Photovoice workshop to the microcultures of their own classrooms and experiment with their own learners. [4]

Photovoice Workshop Procedure

The academics from University of Delaware (UDEL) and Dickinson College instructed the cohort of participants (16 undergraduate Ukrainian students, candidate teachers) about the Photovoice method. A presentation accompanied by visuals documenting products which were created by previous participants were used in order to demonstrate the diversity of topics and diversity of images taken. Participants were given practical examples and time for asking questions. The students signed GDPR documentation which permitted this article's author to process their data. Having been given direction by instructors of the Photovoice method, the students were given cameras and time to depict either themselves, their colleagues, their peers, or material objects located within their immediate environment. Participants were given one hour to take photos and to think about the following questions while taking the photos:

- How did you feel when you arrived in Slovakia from Ukraine?
- What did you leave behind in Ukraine?
- Who do you want to become?
- What lies ahead for you after leaving Ukraine? [2]

After one hour, the students returned to the classroom and returned the cameras to their instructors who chose a few photos from each participant. Workshop instructors downloaded digital images onto a computer, and each participant selected their favorite images to print using the Cyanotype process. After that the participants wrote captions about one selected image (poem, a short paragraph, a few-lines long story, random sentences, etc.). Once the images were developed, participants of the workshop were asked to consider the following additional questions:

- Why does this image matter to me?
- Why might it matter to people around me (family, friends, city, nation)?
- Why might it matter to the world? [1]

The abovementioned questions were posed in order to make students think outside the box (stimulating both emotions and cognition), taking into consideration the significance of the image on a personal, local, and global level. The students had some time to share their experience in groups and to suggest the ways to use what they have learnt in their future practice with middle-school and high-school learners. The students also agreed to the possibility of having their captioned photos exhibited in the future.

Methodology

We were primarily interested in the effects of the Photovoice workshop on candidate teachers' global skills and what benefits it brought them in terms of their professional and personal development. In order to explore this, we asked our participants to write a short reflective essay answering the following questions:

- What new things have you learnt during the photovoice workshop?
- Could you reflect on this new experience in more detail?
- Did the workshop provide you with some tips for your future career, something you could use with your learners?
- Did the workshop improve your global skills which you will use in the future?

To be more precise, the data gathering procedure was divided into the following phases: seeking permission from students to analyze and anonymously publish excerpts from their essays, as well as the photos which they developed, the administration of essays, the organization and analysis of collected data from essays. The answers were collected and clustered into the following categories: Global skills (critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, digital skills); Learning something new and having opportunities; An international and cultural experience; Teachers'



personality and approach; Self-expression (intrapersonal development); Cooperation with others (interpersonal relationships).

Results

Based on the analyzed essays and the data collected from them, we have come to some valuable findings which revealed quite a lot about the professional and personal development of candidate teachers. The results revealed that Ukrainian undergraduate students benefited from the workshops in many ways. They gained valuable insights from foreign instructors and and took part in intellectually engaging lessons, improved their intercultural communication skills, critical thinking, creativity, and a range of other global skills as can be viewed below:

I found the workshop to be an enriching and empowering experience. It provided a unique platform for self-expression through the lens of photography. I believe that the workshop's emphasis on participatory and inclusive practices was rather beneficial. (Respondent no. 1)

Our survey also showed that students were curious about the world and showed interest in being more engaged with the world:

The instructors introduced us to an amazing kind of art - photography and its methods, which were mind-blowing. I learnt a lot about how to share my story with the world through the powerful language of photography, how to express myself. (Respondent no. 10)

Perhaps most important was that students learnt something about themselves through producing their own images and exploring different communicative expressions which were used during the workshops. They also had the chance to explore the intensity of the image via their own practice and hands-on experience:

The workshop allowed us to be actively involved in the process of making photographs. It was a perfect blend of theory and practice. It was very interesting for me to make pictures! Also, it was a transformative experience to see how a single photograph can evoke emotion! (Respondent no. 5)

The highlight of the workshop was the practical component, where the participants had the chance to put their newfound knowledge into action. (Respondent no. 3)

The results of our small-scale survey also revealed that the students' openness, communication skills, empathy, worldview and self-awareness significantly improved after participating in the Photovoice workshop.

The instructors introduced us to the use of angles for photography to create importance, drama, contrast, a peaceful atmosphere, etc. Like they said photography is a language that everyone can communicate in. I gained confidence in using photography to communicate the meaning in an image way. The workshop gave me an insight into my peer's stories which I really appreciate. (Respondent no. 7)

The students had a chance to experience, reflect, produce, share and find ways of taking action and implementing some elements of the Photovoice method in their own teaching, which was in line with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation):

I would definitely use it in my practice. Photography allows children to see the world from different sides, they can use photos to tell stories and discussing photographs encourage critical thinking. In conclusion, attending the Photo Voice workshop discovered my passion for photography, leading me to purchase my own camera! (Respondent no. 5)

Implications for Future Research

The following are the recommendations drawn from this study: A similar study may be done in the future taking into consideration the beauty and truth in the images, and how the journalists or photographers communicate ideas about the world and about how images help us understand the world (Boix Mansilla, 2016); More faculty members could participate in Photovoice workshops and cascade their knowledge to their students – candidate teachers; Faculty members can consider



integrating the key principles of the Photovoice method in their teaching; A more in-depth study can be undertaken with more participants in the future.

Conclusion

The Photovoice workshop was a cultural and international experience for students. They appreciated the personality and approach of the instructors who created a conducive environment for learning and supported student self-expression. Besides global skills, students' self-expression and self-reflection skills were also fostered. Photovoice as a method helped foster students' tolerance and cultural awareness. The students' cultural and emotional intelligence was also elevated. The type of learning enhanced through Photovoice was attractive for students. The workshops were well-organized, logical and consistent, and most importantly, they were intellectually challenging and stimulating for all groups. Photovoice workshops provided new opportunities for both students and teachers in the context of their personal and professional development.

The findings of this survey provide a basis for integrating more experiential and activating methods into higher education. The Photovoice workshops paved the way for the kind of learning which future teachers need to be prepared for their life in our interdependent/globalized world. Using Photovoice as a method in education of candidate teachers can create basis for global citizenship education, moving away from traditional teacher-centered approaches towards more student-centered ones, taking into consideration globally and culturally responsive pedagogy. To sum up, the Photovoice workshop allowed participants to discover the power of photography as a means of self-expression and social advocacy. We hope that Photovoice will be used more in the future as a valuable pedagogical approach, not only in teacher training programs but also in other study fields at the Faculty of Arts because of its power to engage students in learning about themselves and about the world.

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