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Using Photovoice via Online Platforms to Determine the Need for LGBTQAI+ Inclusive Curriculum

Abstract

This case study is a concentrated look at how online video communications services like Zoom and Microsoft Teams can provide a useful platform for conducting interviews while using the methodological approach of Photovoice. My research aimed to gain insight into the LGBTQAI+ student experience in higher education and support the development of research-informed policy to promote inclusive environments. For my research, I chose to use the Participant Active Research approach of Photovoice and, given the in-depth, extended nature of the research, as well as the geographical diversity of the participants, we chose to use online video communications tools to conduct training and interviews. Online video communications allowed the participants greater levels of flexibility and convenience. The case study shows that greater levels of flexibility and convenience are important when multiple contact points with participants are needed to complete research. The case study also shows that the success experienced in using online video platforms for interviews did not extend to focus groups. Overall, the case study shows that online video communications services can be used to successfully conduct qualitative research, specifically with the Participant Active Research approach of Photovoice to gather rich data that reflects participants' lived experiences.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- Understand basic Photovoice and Participant Active Research approaches
- Discuss how online engagement can positively contribute to the interview process
- Understand that online tools can be used to conduct qualitative research

Project Overview and Context

The literature on the lived experience of LGBTQAI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Asexual, Intersexed, and + which includes but is not limited to other types of sexual identities, such as pansexual, gender-queer, gender fluid, two spirit, and other identities) students in higher education is surprisingly limited. Legg et al. (2020) recently noted that,

Even with the heightened visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students on college (University) campuses, the literature still does not capture the specific and unique experiences of health, scholarship, and persistence of this population (p. 1).

Additionally, they continued to state, there is still little information about the persistence to graduation of LGBT college (university) students. Indeed, their invisibility remains both on campus and in the literature. There are many unexamined questions regarding LGBT college students. There is still no work found in the literature that explores resilience, positive survival skills, and academic success of LGBT college students (p. 420).

The limited body of research literature that does exist argues that LGBTQAI+ university students are not supported or validated consistently across the university setting, which results in an irregular student experience. This irregular student experience could create feelings of exclusion resulting in decreased student retention and/or a variety of degree attainment (Pitcher & Simmons, 2020; Patel, 2015). In addition, LGBTQAI+ students deal with a unique set of difficulties that their heterosexual peers do not. For example, they may

- question “if and when to come out” and “to whom to come out to,”
- contend with the fear and anxiety of potential harassment, discrimination, and assault,
- have to deal with being a victim of a hate crime (Denton, 2020).

As a result of the additional mental and emotional issues that LGBTQAI+ students face, as well as other issues around discrimination and marginalization, these students are more likely to suspend their studies or leave university before they complete their degree program (Agnich & Morgan, 2020; Notaro, 2020; Okanlawon, 2020; Phipps, 2020; Schmalzbauer, 2020; Strauss et al., 2020).

These LGBTQAI+ student inclusion issues are a relevant and important to both students who identify as LGBTQAI+ and for Higher Education institutions that have a duty to create and foster inclusive spaces to allow all students to succeed.

The overarching goal of my research is twofold,

1. to gain insight into the LGBTQAI+ student experience in higher education, thus adding to an area of scholarship that is under investigated, and
2. to help develop research-informed policy that may create more inclusive environments for LGBTQAI+ students.

In order to achieve my research goals, I employed the Participant Active Research approach of Photovoice to conduct qualitative research with LGBTQAI+ students via online platforms.

Is Photovoice an Appropriate Approach for This Type of Research?

The aims and objectives of my research project were to document and consider the strengths, weakness, and concerns of LGBTQAI+ students in higher education, as well as to potentially provide guidance on issues of inclusivity to university leadership/policymakers. Photovoice was determined to be an appropriate and suitable methodology because it has an established record of accomplishment in exploring the lived experiences of marginalized populations (Budig et al., 2018). For example, Photovoice can be seen when exploring topics such as Ethnicity (Miranda et al., 2021), Race (Davis & Mitchell, 2021; Vaishnav, 2021; Willett et al., 2021), Gender Identity (Christensen et al., 2020; Miranda et al., 2021), and Sexuality (Christensen et al., 2020; Bardhoshi et al., 2018; Capous-Desyllas & Mountz, 2019; Kessi, 2018; Wagner et al., 2016).

Are Online Platforms a Good Choice for Participant Active Research?

Given the multiple contact points associated with my Photovoice research approach, I chose to meet with participants via online platforms Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This method for the meeting to train and interview participants provided greater levels of flexibility to the research participant as they could schedule meetings that best accommodated their schedules. The Zoom and Microsoft Teams platforms were chosen as the most suitable platforms as both are widely used within the university and participants would have experience using either platform to communicate effectively. Although online platforms are not typically employed to conduct Photovoice research, this choice allowed me to accommodate geographical restrictions and work with challenging schedules in a format that was familiar to participants.

Section Summary

- Research on LGBTQAI+ students in higher education is very limited.
- LGBTQAI+ students face a range of additional issues not faced by their peers from other parts of the gender, sexuality, and identity spectrum.
- The goal of my research project was to develop a better understanding of the LGBTQAI+ student experience to positively affect change in inclusion policies.

- Photovoice is a Participant Active Research approach that is tested and proven to capture the voice of marginalized populations.
- Online platforms allow Photovoice research to occur when face-to-face meeting is not an option due to geographically or physical restrictions and or when working with challenging schedules.

Research Design

What Is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a photographic research methodology where the participants document, reflect, and comment on issues impacting their community through the taking of photographs and then discussing the stories behind those photos. (Li et al., 2001; Wang & Burris, 1997b). Developed by Wang and Burris (1997b), Photovoice is a research approach that has three main goals:

1. to allow people to document and consider their community's strengths, weaknesses, and concerns both historically and contemporarily,
2. to encourage serious discourse and information sharing about essential issues through discussion of photographs, and finally
3. to influence policy and policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997b).

Photovoice places the participant at the centre of the knowledge creation process, thus classifying the methodology within the Participant Active Research approach. The practice of Participant Active Research is a process where the population that is being investigated act as co-researchers as they examine the issues, questions, and concerns of the community in which they are a part (Wang & Burris, 1997b; Wang, 2006).

Photovoice contributors are invited to document their feelings, thoughts, and opinions about a particular phenomenon: in the case of my research, the experience of LGBTQAI+ University students. Once participants took the photos, they would engage in interviews/discussions to share the stories behind the photos, providing a narrative of what and why they took the photos (Wang & Burris, 1997b; Wang, 2006). This process is to create what Wang and Burris (1997b, p. 370) calls "critical dialogue."

The participant is instrumental in the Photovoice approach as they determine what images are selected and provide the narratives behind the images. This can be an extremely powerful experience, as it provides an enabling voice for community members who have been historically under represented or ignored in conversations that directly impacts their community (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016). It is for that exact reason that I chose to use Photovoice in my research: to give speech to the muted and grow a better understanding of the LGBTQAI+ student voice in higher education (Wang & Burris, 1994).

Designing Photovoice Research

Asking someone to participate in a Photovoice project is a significantly different request than asking someone to fill out a questionnaire or participate in a traditional, in-person semi-structured interview. The participant is being asked to make a commitment that will take several weeks or months depending on the length of the Photovoice project. My particular project required 8 weeks of participation in total. As a result, it was critical that the research design recognize both the commitment by the participant as well as the participant's possible unfamiliarity with the approach. With this recognition, the research design specifically built-in multiple and flexible points of contact that would not have been possible for either the participant or investigator if not for the use of online video communications services.

Ensuring Understanding of the Research Method

While the popularity of Photovoice has grown in recent years, the use of it can still be novel to many. As a result, I designed my research to accommodate this potential lack of understanding and build in a training session for each participant. Before the research started, participants would be invited to attend a personal online meeting to discuss the project and what was being requested of them. Once the participants agreed and the participant consent forms were completed, a follow-up meeting would be scheduled a week later to track the participants progress. To make this meeting convenient for the participant, the interview would be conducted using the online video communication platform of the participants choice: Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participants would be asked to take at least three (3) photos and then the first meeting would focus on making sure participants were comfortable in what they were providing to the research and to get participants familiar with the questions that would be asked about their photos.

Designing Interview Questions

I chose to adopt my interview questions from the "SHOWeD" questions that Wang and Burris (1997a) modified from the work of Wallerstein (1987) specifically for Photovoice projects. Participants were asked six questions about each photo they took:

1. "What is seen here?"
2. "What is really happening?"
3. "How does this relate to your experience?"
4. "Why are things this way?"
5. "How could this image be used to educate people?"
6. "What else can we do about it?"

Planning the Research Interviews

Once all the participants' questions and concerns were addressed and the first three pictures were discussed to ensure the participant had a grasp of the content they were meant to create, the participants would be given 3 weeks to take ten (10) additional photos to express their feelings, thoughts, and or experiences around being an LGBTQAI+ university student. As students were geographically diverse, I designed the research to continue using online video communications to meet with participants. The modified "SHOWeD" questions would be asked again for each picture that participants took. The participants would be given an additional three (3) weeks to take an additional ten (10) photos and the same process would occur. After the last set of photos were submitted and the interview was completed, the participants would be invited to participate in a final interview to reflect on their photographic journey 1 week later.

Designing Focus Groups

Once the first cohort of five participants had completed the research project, I would invite them to participate in an online focus group. The intent of the focus group was to bring together participants and gain a conversational perspective about their engagement in the research, unlike the individual interviews, which were to be driven by the "SHOWeD" approach. The focus group was designed to be more of a general conversation about their experiences as participants.

Reflecting on the Research Design

Determining the points of contact within the design of the research was critical. It was important that participants had the correct level of support/guidance to ensure their confidence in creating material that would be beneficial for my research project. It is for that reason I wanted to meet with the participants a couple of times to act as a "stop-check" to make sure the participants understand what was expected of them and to review the three photos to demonstrate they knew what they were doing. If I did not consider this checkin, I risked allowing participants to proceed without proper support, which could negatively affect the photo submissions and impair the quality of data.

I believe that having the meetings via an online video communication would provide several advantages to the design of the research.

1. It allowed for greater ease for the research participant. They could meet with me when it was most convenient for them without having travel or extra time or cost considerations.

2. Because of the line of inquiry, I wanted the participants to be comfortable while talking about what might be a sensitive topic. Using online video would allow the participant to select when they wanted to talk and from a location of their choosing.

Section Summary

- Photovoice is a photographic research methodology in which participants take photographs and then comment on the stories behind the pictures and how they reflect their lived experiences in semistructured interviews.
- My research design created specific and strategic touch points to provide support and guidance to research participants.
- Using online video communications services was a strategic research decision as it allowed for greater freedom for participants to meet with me.
- The interview section of my research was designed to use the “SHOWeD” approach that is modified specifically for the use of Photovoice-based research.

Research Practicalities/Participant Management

As with any research project, organization is a critical to keep the project moving forward. Organization was particularly important in this project as each participant needed to be tracked and contacted in relation to when they joined the project. For this project, 18 people were recruited through LGBTQAI+ student network groups in the first 5 months, with new participants accepted as the research project continued. Using student network groups ensured the sample reflected the LGBTQAI+ university student population. Recruitment remained open to continue recruiting research participants, as it was not necessary to start all participants at the same time.

Due to this research design decision, the progress of each participant needed to be closely tracked to ensure proper support and follow up through the full Photovoice process. In order to ensure participant management, I used a calendar to plot each participant’s initial informational meeting, 1-week follow up, first 10 photo set interview, second 10 photo set interview, and reflective discussion. I also included reminder e-mails for each participant in the calendar to prompt them of photo submissions and interview dates, as well as reminders of available support if required.

Creating dynamic individual online calendars and reminder notices assisted greatly in the active management of all of the research participants. Utilizing Microsoft Teams and Outlook, I was able to share my calendar with the participants individually, allowing them the freedom to schedule their interviews on their own and reducing some of the administrative responsibilities.

The original design of the research also included a focus group. As with the individual participant meetings, the focus group needed to be organized and planned and online tools were used. There was an attempt to conduct an online focus group with the first cohort of participants, however, as the “Method in Action” section will explain, further focus groups were not attempted using online video communication services.

Key ethical considerations included protecting the privacy and identities of participants who were not “out” (i.e., those who had revealed and did not conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity). This was a concern for several participants and some potential participants decided not to participate in the research project as a result. To ensure identity protection, none of the online discussions was visually recorded and all of the submitted photos were identified through a system of anonymous coding. Participants were allowed to withdrawal from the project at any time during the process, as well as after completion.

Section Summary

- The Photovoice approach requires a lot of time and attention to conduct correctly. Researchers who conduct Photovoice projects need to actively manage the needs and progress of participants.
- Organization is critical in Photovoice research. Creating clear and easy to follow calendars that allow anyone on the research team to easily locate and identify the progress of your participants can be beneficial.
- Ethical considerations around identity were key in working with LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Method in Action

Plan to Work

One should not use Photovoice if you want to be a passive actor in your data gather process. As stated at the beginning of this case study, Photovoice is classified as Participant Active Research. This is not just active participation on the part of the participant. As a researcher, I engaged with participants on a regular and consistent basis. Because my project was designed with a rolling recruitment process, it required constant attention and review. You may elect to start all of your participants at the same time, but you will need to be mindful of how much capacity you have as a researcher to complete interviews. Because I was completing the project by myself, I elected a staggered/rolling approach as it reduced the risk of becoming congested and overwhelmed with interviews at one time.

Regardless of when the participants started with the project, one of the largest hurdles I discovered was simply getting the participants started. The majority of the participants were not familiar with Photovoice, so it took some a while to get their footing. Many of the participants had a slow start, as they were not really sure what to take pictures of, and I supported them with discussions of literal subject matter versus

symbolic subject matter. I anticipated this issue, which is why additional contact points were built into the research design. If I had not included these early contact points to allow the participants to get the support and guidance they needed via online meetings, I believe that the quality of the photo submissions would have suffered and the research could have been seriously hampered. When using approaches like Photovoice, you need to make sure that the research is supported as much as possible to ensure participant retention and project completion. Utilizing online video communication services provided an effective and efficient tool to deliver the needed support.

Effective Online Interviews

Prior to this experience, I supported the notion that face-to-face interviews were superior to online interviews. However, this project demonstrated that the differences between the two are narrowing. Because people are becoming more comfortable using online communication tools, the negatives of using virtual platforms are lessening.

There have been concerns that online communication prevents an authentic qualitative research experience from occurring. I would agree with Sullivan (2012) that the online interview experience still allows the research to collect a wealth of material, including the verbal and nonverbal cues, that come from face-to-face interviews. This is not to say online interviews are an exact replacement for face-to-face interviews, as online interviews do have specific challenges. When conducting interviews, you should always have a plan of action, and when the interviews are online, the more structure and focus you can provide as the interviewer the better the online exchange will be. Better online interviews facilitate participant comfort, understanding, sharing, participation, and retention. For additional information on developing qualitative online interviews, the work of Salmons (2014) can be useful. I found that using the “SHOWeD” questions provided an established framework for the time spent online. Participants arrived aware of what was going to be asked and they could collect their thoughts prior to the meeting. While the interviews were open-ended and allowed for further exploration of their photos, the six prepared questions provided a helpful agenda to what could have been awkward exchanges. In addition, prior to each meeting, I would create a slide show of their photographs in PowerPoint. During the interview, I would share my screen so it was clear to them, as well as to myself, exactly which photo was being discussed. I would also use the audio record function available on PowerPoint to record the conversation. This greatly aided when it came to the data analysis phase of the research as the image and audio narration of that image were contained on one document. With each participant providing 20–23 images, the management and coordination of data will be instrumental for a successful project.

Online Focus Group Difficulties

Unlike the success of the individual online interviews, I was unable to use online communication services to create fruitful focus groups. Conducting the focus groups online proved extremely difficult to administrate and the results produced were disappointing.

Traditionally, participants lead the conversation that occurs in a focus group. While at times, the focus groups may need some direction or encouragement by the researcher, for the most part, it is the participants who are leading the exchange. The online focus group experience was not organic in any sense to the word. The free-flowing conversation was hindered by participants accidentally speaking over one another on the online platform and this resulted in a series of back and forth apologies. The participants started to use the “raised hand” feature in Zoom to indicate they would like to speak and then facilitate turn taking. Although this feature stopped the interruptions, it also prevented any real free-flowing conversation. I felt I was posing a single question and the participants would respond only to me and then I would move on to the next topic. There was a serious lack of interaction between the participants, which negatively affected the function and purpose of the focus group. As a result, it was decided that focus groups would no longer be attempted online. If you are entertaining the idea of hosting an online focus group, I would suggest that you have a clear plan of action. In my research, the focus group did not translate as seamlessly from face-to-face interactions to online platforms as individual interviews.

Section Summary

- Photovoice is a time-intensive methodology.
- Online interviews are effective when multiple touch points with the participant need to occur. The online format provided a level of accessibility that aided in the engagement and retention of research participants in my research.
- Focus Groups did not translate as seamlessly to an online communication format as interviews in my research.

Practical Lessons Learned

Selecting a methodology should never be a decision taken lightly. When we engage in a research project, there needs to be an understanding of why they work is needed and what approach will be the best in addressing that need. The moment that the methodology cannot be justified in its selection or application, we as researchers, need to stop. If we do not have an understanding of our selected methodological purpose, we as researchers will not be able to recognize if and when the methodology is or is not working as planned. This is how I was able to know that online semi-structured interviews were producing fruitful

data, whereas focus groups were not offering such data. The utilization of online communications did not work for all aspects of Photovoice, with the hosting of focus groups significantly impacted. But, my research has shown that using an online communication service such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams to conduct participant interviews can provide an alternative option to collect rich data of participants' lived experiences. Participants found the online interviews to be more convenient as they did not have to travel to a location to participate. Both of these examples are significant comparative advantages to their face-to-face counterpart. This is not to say that online interviews are easier, especially given that online interviews are more successful when more planning and a set framework are applied.

We as researchers must understand how we want our research to affect the wider community and where we want to see its effects. As my PhD supervisor told me, "If you do not know where you are going, any path will take you there." This research experience affirmed for me that, as researchers, we need to have a developed understanding of our research purpose. If we are not clear about the aims and objectives of our research, then selecting an appropriate methodology will be virtually impossible. Our methodology is the foundation on which the rest of our work sits. If our foundation is cracked or unlevel, the entirety of our project will also suffer.

For example, my goal in this research was to influence positive change for LGBTQAI+ students. As stated at the start of this case study, I acknowledged the lack of work conducted on the LGBTAI+ student experience. The limited research into LGBTAI+ students experience did highlight their exclusionary experiences, both in terms of university policy and in terms of curriculum contributing to increased rates of attrition. I needed to select a methodology that enabled my research to document experiences, provide possible explanations, and also reach an end goal of policy change. Photovoice provided a methodology to do all of that and online platforms allowed me to use that methodology effectively with individuals.

I could have elected to do questionnaires or interviews, but because I took the time to explore and seek alternative approaches, I was able to discover and apply an approach that felt like a tailored design for my research's intended aims and objectives. One of the possible take away messages from this case study is to take the time to explore and discover new and novel approaches to conducting research. If we take the time to explore methods and methodologies, we may find the new and novel might just be the playbook needed to achieve the aims and objectives of our projects.

Section Summary

- Researchers should understand their aims and objectives before they select their methodology.
- Researchers should continue to ask themselves if their methodology allows them to achieve their aims and objectives.

- Researchers should not settle for only typical methodological approaches, as there might be something they are unaware of that provides the ideal approach.

Conclusion

New and unique issues arise as researchers utilize online opportunities. For some methodologies, operating in an online environment may tear at the very fabric of the approach, rendering it less effective and at times completely useless—as my attempt to conduct online focus groups suggested. When approaches can accommodate online elements, however, researchers will find that they can explore further, wider and with greater accessibility. My research revealed that Photovoice transitions quite well to an online format.

As more of us are looking to conduct research online, it is important that we do not become complacent in the methodologies that are used in the online space. Photovoice is a valuable approach for exploring lived experiences, because, although the approach requires a lot of attention, it provides a direct voice to participants, their lives, and their perspectives. Qualitative research can be conducted online and Photovoice is just one example of using the online space to gather robust qualitative data.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What might be the pros and cons of Participant Active Research?
2. When would Photovoice be an appropriate methodology to select?
3. How could Photovoice provide more data than just a semi-structured interview?
4. What are some advantages of conducting qualitative research online? How do they compare to the disadvantages?

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