Photovoice as Reflective Assessment in Business Ethics Education: Fostering Self Authorship and Authentic Learning

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Abstract

This article examines the pedagogical potential of Photovoice as a reflective assessment method in Business Ethics education, addressing a notable gap in both pedagogical and methodological scholarship. While Photovoice is well established as a qualitative research tool, its application within higher-education assessment remains insufficiently theorised. Drawing on two years of assessment data from second-year undergraduates, complemented by reflective practitioner insights, the study evaluates how Photovoice fosters critical reflection, deepens ethical understanding, and supports the development of self-authorship.

In this reflective assessment, learners employed photographic artefacts to connect ethical theory with lived experience, enabling engagement with abstract concepts through authentic, situated analysis. Quantitative and qualitative feedback indicates that Photovoice enhanced learners' capacity to articulate ethical reasoning, strengthened critical consciousness, and increased engagement with course materials. Learners reported greater confidence in expressing personal ethical positions and applying theoretical frameworks to real-world contexts.

Informed by Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship (1999, 2001), findings suggest that Photovoice validates learners as knowers, grounds learning in experiential contexts, and facilitates greater levels of understanding. The study offers an empirically informed evaluation of Photovoice as a reflective assessment approach in higher education, highlighting its potential to create greater levels of engagement and deeper learning.

Keywords: Photovoice, Assessment, Self-Authorship, Engagement

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Introduction

Photovoice has long been recognised as a powerful methodology for amplifying participant voice, enabling individuals to document, and critically reflect on lived experiences through images and narratives. Photovoice as a methodology was conceptualised by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997), as a qualitative research methodology that positions participants' photographic representations central to the construction of meaning. Although rooted in Public Health, Photovoice has expanded significantly over the past three decades and has gained traction across multiple academic disciplines as a rigorous and participatory mode of inquiry (Ho, 2025; Roofe et al., 2025; Yoshihama, 2025) as well as has facilitated the representation of a wide array of marginalised and silenced communities (Baker & Wang, 2006; Kroger et al., 2004; Strack & Magill, 2004; Wang et al., 2004; Wang & Pies, 2004).

Alongside this growing methodological diversification within academic disciplines, interest in the pedagogical potential of Photovoice has also expanded. Although the use of Photovoice in education has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention, existing contributions remain largely exploratory. For instance, Wang (2020, p. 17) noted that "the existing literature suggests a potential role of photovoice as a useful assessment tool in education." Four years later, Trask et al. (2024) similarly described Photovoice as a "promising avenue" for teaching and learning, yet substantive empirical evaluations continue to be limited. This lack of systematic investigation is even more evident regarding Photovoice as an assessment practice, as Wang (2020) also observed.

This paper seeks to address these theoretical and methodological gaps by advancing an examination of Photovoice as a reflective assessment mechanism within higher education. This paper therefore positions Photovoice not simply as a learning tool, but as a novel reflective assessment tactic capable of deepening students' engagement and strengthening the authenticity of their academic work. Drawing on two years of data from second-year university students enrolled in an introductory Business Ethics module, alongside reflective analysis from the author's own research practice, the article demonstrates how the Photovoice framework can be pedagogically adapted to create meaningful assessment. The argument developed herein contends that Photovoice facilitates processes of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001; Kreber et al., 2007), fostering deeper, more authentic engagement with ethical concepts. By repositioning learners as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients, Photovoice offers a powerful mechanism for enhancing both pedagogical practice and assessment design in contemporary higher education. At the same time, the rapid expansion of Generative AI has unsettled traditional understandings of authorship and raised urgent questions about academic integrity in assessment tasks. In this context, Photovoice could provide an important counterpoint: its emphasis on self-authorship, personal visual representation, and contextualised narrative commentary could be more AI- resistant. The relationship between Photovoice and self-authorship is therefore not incidental but central to its value as an assessment method in the current educational landscape.

Business ethics education occupies a distinctive pedagogical space. It requires learners to move beyond mastery of normative frameworks toward the development of moral imagination and ethical sensemaking in contexts marked by power asymmetries, competing stakeholder claims, and organisational ambiguity. Students frequently encounter the subject as abstract or peripheral to "real" business, yet they will soon make decisions with material consequences for workers, consumers, communities, and the natural environment. Photovoice is particularly pertinent here because it invites learners to treat their own lived or observed experiences as legitimate sites of ethical inquiry. By requiring students to select, photograph (or otherwise visually represent), and theoretically analyse an ethical tension they have encountered, the method grounds abstract concepts in authentic organisational or market realities. This directly supports the paper's central hypothesis: that Photovoice, when used as reflective assessment, fosters self-authorship by validating learners as

knowers, situating ethical reasoning in personally meaningful contexts, and enabling the co-construction of meaning between theory and practice that traditional essay-based assessments often struggle to achieve in business ethics.

Photovoice as a Research Methodology

At its core, Photovoice positions participation and advocacy as central methodological commitments, seeking to empower individuals, particularly those situated within socially marginalized groups, to articulate their lived experiences through photography. The photographic image operates as a visual catalyst, enabling participants to narrate their everyday realities, articulate understandings, and illuminate challenges during individual interviews or focus group discussions (Wang & Burris, 1997). As Oliffe and Bottorff (2007, p. 850) contend,

> "Photovoice can yield fascinating empirical data and provide unique insight into diverse phenomena, as well as empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible."

A defining feature of the method is the SHOWeD questioning framework, adapted by Wang and Burris from the earlier work of Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988). This structured set of prompts:

S – What do you See here?

H – What is really Happening here?

O – How does this relate to Our lives?

W – Why does this situation exist?

D – What can we Do about it?

This set of questions provides a systematic yet participant-centred mechanism for eliciting deeper reflection and understanding around the photographs provided by participants (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang et al., 1998).

The methodological foundation of Photovoice is supported by three interrelated theoretical frameworks. Firstly, Critical Consciousness Theory offers a lens through which participants develop a more nuanced and critical understanding of their social world, recognising both the plurality and the contradictions inherent in lived experience (Freire, 1973; 2020). Critical consciousness ensures that student outputs represent actual understanding, not memorised or performative responses. Validity increases because the assessment captures the process and substance of critical learning. Secondly, Feminist Theory foregrounds questions of power, justice, and equity, challenging structural inequalities and amplifying voices that have historically been marginalised (Flax, 2005). A feminist approach ensures that assessments do not privilege only dominant voices or normative forms of academic expression. Validity increases because the assessment more accurately captures the full range of learning across diverse learners and identities. Thirdly, documentary photography contributes an epistemological commitment to producing authentic, grounded representations of people, places, and events (Wang et al., 2004; Brown, 2022). In combination, these frameworks provide a coherent and mutually reinforcing foundation for Photovoice, ensuring that the method not only documents experience but also interrogates the social conditions shaping it. Documentary photography produces artefacts that serve as direct, situated indicators of learning, strengthening the alignment between what is assessed and what students actually did or did not understand. Validity improves because the learning outcome is directly observable. Together, these theoretical frameworks form a coherent methodological and epistemological framework in which critical reflection, social justice, and authentic representation are inseparable. The result is an assessment approach that captures both the process and outcomes of learning, thereby enhancing validity through the alignment of student voice, lived experience, and demonstrable evidence of understanding.

Photovoice as Pedagogy

Recent scholarship has increasingly explored the potential of Photovoice not only as a research methodology but as a pedagogical tool. Although

interest in Photovoice as a pedagogical tool is growing, research remains limited on how the method has been, or could be, systematically adapted for teaching and learning (Latz et al., 2016; Gallo, 2002; Hernandez et al., 2014; Komaie et al., 2018; Ciolan & Manasia, 2017; Garner, 2014; Perry, 2006; Schell et al., 2009; Stroud, 2014; Stupans et al., 2019). Collectively, these studies indicate that Photovoice can contribute to innovative curriculum design by serving as a participatory learning strategy that deepens student engagement with course content. A consistent theme across this literature is the enhanced interaction Photovoice fosters between learners and learning materials, with studies reporting increased engagement, deeper reflection, and greater inclusivity in classroom processes (Carnahan, 2006; Ciolan & Manasia, 2017; Chio & Fandit, 2007). As a pedagogical intervention, Photovoice extends beyond conventional instructional and assessment techniques, cultivating a range of competencies, visual literacy, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, that are crucial for personal, academic, and professional development.

This is particularly interesting for the study of ethics in general and business ethic in specific because Photovoice offers distinctive value for developing moral imagination, strengthening ethical sensemaking, and deepening experiential learning by inviting learners to critically observe, capture, and interpret real-world ethical tensions through visual inquiry.

Nevertheless, despite this promise, academic inquiry into Photovoice as a pedagogical approach remains sparse. Research examining its effectiveness as an assessment tool is even more limited (Trask et al., 2024; Wang, 2020). This paucity of scholarship underscores the need for further exploration into how Photovoice can be meaningfully integrated into higher education teaching and assessment practices.

The present work responds directly to this gap. It outlines an approach for adapting the principles of Photovoice to design an assessment that fosters deeper learning. By inviting learners to document, reflect upon, and interpret real-world ethical issues through the lens of ethical theory, the assessment positions learners to construct meaningful connections between abstract concepts and lived experience, a process central to the development of Self-Authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This emphasis on learner-driven production supports a pedagogical shift away from Freire's (2020) "banking model" of education, in which learners passively receive knowledge. Instead, it aligns with pedagogical principles that treat learners as self-directed co-constructors of knowledge, actively shaping their educational experience.

Photovoice as an Assessment Tool

Despite increasing enthusiasm within academic communities for Photovoice's pedagogical potential, formal scholarly inquiry into its use as an assessment tool in higher education remains remarkably limited (Wang, 2020). This gap is noteworthy given the well-established advantages of Photovoice as a qualitative research methodology, namely its capacity to elicit critical reflection, and empowering participants as active interpreters of their own realities. When the affordances of Photovoice are considered alongside established theories of reflective practice, clear synergies emerge between the method's theoretical foundations and the aims of reflective assessment.

Reflective assessments are widely embedded in higher education and are recognised for their role in supporting academic, personal, and professional development (Branch, 2010). However, longstanding critiques highlight persistent issues related to both the definition of reflection and the forms through which learners are asked to demonstrate it. Scholars such as Chandler (2000), Crème (2008), and Hiemstra (2001) note that reflection is overwhelmingly expressed through written modes, be that journaling, structured reflective essays, or digital blogs. Yet, as James and Brookfield (2014) argue, this reliance on written formats can undermine the depth and authenticity of reflective engagement. Learners often lack confidence in reflective writing, leading to superficial, rushed, and sometimes formulaic accounts that fail to demonstrate genuine critical self-interrogation. Photovoice shifts the starting point to an image, which lowers the writing barrier and allows students to think visually first. Visual stimuli

activate emotional and sensory memory, which can unlock richer reflection (Jayantini et al, 2022).

In designing a reflective assessment that is aimed to evaluate learners' ability to understand and apply ethical concepts to their own lived contexts, Photovoice offered a compelling solution to these established limitations. Given its proven ability to elicit meaningful self-examination in research settings (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007), Photovoice provided an alternative reflective medium, one that encourages learners to externalise their thinking, interpret personal experience through symbolic representation, and engage in deeper analysis anchored by a visual artefact. This multimodal approach could help mitigate the constraints of traditional written reflection by providing learners with a concrete, experiential starting point from which critical inquiry can unfold.

Moreover, the integration of Photovoice into reflective assessment aligns with broader shifts in higher education toward participatory, creative, and student-centred approaches. As institutions increasingly seek to diversify assessment methods in ways that promote authenticity, engagement, and inclusivity, Photovoice offers a theoretical robust pathway for expanding the reflective repertoire available to learners. Its emphasis on experience, agency, and critical interpretation positions it as a valuable addition to the landscape of innovative assessment practices, particularly in disciplines such as Ethics, where the connection between theory and lived experience is central to meaningful learning**.**

Why is this type of assessment needed.

Developing assessment practices that are fair, transparent, and analytically robust is central to effective curriculum design (Gbadago et al., 2025). Yet assessments do not exist outside social, cultural, or historical contexts. As Leathwood (2005) argues, they are embedded within broader socio-political structures and therefore cannot be assumed to be neutral. Hanesworth, Bracken, and Elkington (2019) further emphasise that assessments are never culturally or value-free, a point of particular significance in disciplines such as ethics, where learners' moral reasoning is shaped by their personal histories, identities, and social positions.

In response to the complex demands of contemporary higher education, Baxter Magolda (1999, 2001) contends that learners must develop 'self-authorship' which is the capacity for independent, critically informed, and morally grounded judgment. Kreber et al. (2007, p. 30) describe self-authorship as the "intellectual, moral and personal complexity" required to navigate the multifaceted personal, vocational, and civic challenges encountered beyond university. Achieving this developmental capacity requires learning environments that foster three key principles: (1) validating learners as knowers, (2) situating learning within the learner's lived experiences, and (3) constructing knowledge mutually through dialogue and co-creation (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship describes the development of an internal capacity to construct and coordinate one's own beliefs, identity, and relationships rather than relying primarily on external authorities. Although initially developed through Baxter Magolda's longitudinal research, the concept has subsequently been expanded by a substantial body of scholarship. For example, Pizzolato (2005) highlighted the role of "provocative moments" and developmental challenges in prompting movement towards self-authorship, while Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) demonstrated how educational environments can facilitate progression from external formula-following towards greater self-authored meaning-making. Furthermore, Baxter Magolda and King's Learning Partnerships Model emphasises the importance of educational practices that balance challenge and support to foster self-authorship. Recent scholarship has also explored the applicability of self-authorship across diverse cultural and social contexts, extending understanding of how cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions interact in the development of self-authored individuals.

In the specific domain of business ethics, these principles have resonance. Business ethics assessments must evaluate not only whether learners can recite philosophical positions but whether they can apply them reflexively to

organisational realities they may one day shape or be shaped by. Traditional written reflections or essays can permit students to demonstrate surface-level understanding while remaining detached from their own positionality or the messy, embodied contexts in which ethical tensions arise. Photovoice counters this by requiring learners to produce a visual artefact drawn from their own lifeworld and to articulate why that image matters ethically, using theoretical language. The resulting work provides direct evidence of the "intellectual, moral and personal complexity" (Kreber et al., 2007, p. 30) that self-authorship entails for responsible business practice. Moreover, because the photograph must be personally situated in time and place, the method raises the authenticity threshold at a moment when generative AI tools can readily produce fluent but ungrounded written reflections on ethical dilemmas.

When applied to assessment design, these principles hold significant implications. Self-authorship positions learners as bringing unique perspectives to their work, perspectives that only they can articulate [Principle 1]. It requires opportunities for reflective reasoning through which learners critically engage with their emotions, values, and interpretations [Principle 3], and within contexts that are real or personally meaningful rather than abstract or detached [Principle 2]. For these reasons, Baxter Magolda's framework of self-authorship serves as a compelling theoretical bridge between Photovoice as "the research method" and Photovoice as "the pedagogical tool" and one that will be examined to see if Photovoice can produce the values of self-authorship. The alignment between the two is conceptually clear: both foreground learner agency, privilege experiential understanding, and rely on interpretive processes that are co-constructed and deeply reflective. Thus, the integration of Photovoice into assessment practice is not merely innovative but theoretically justified. It offers a pedagogically grounded extension of Wang and Burris's original methodological design, positioning Photovoice as a credible and robust mechanism for assessing learning in higher education.

Traditional assessment formats often struggle to meet these aims. Such formats frequently reward memorisation or procedural proficiency and, increasingly, can be replicated by generative AI tools. By contrast, Photovoice incorporates the learner's lived experience into the assessment itself, using photography as both artefact as well as metaphoric and analytic prompt, thereby facilitating a more authentic, reflexive, and learner-centred evaluative process. The rise of Generative AI has prompted fresh scrutiny of reflective assessment practices (Lehane & Wright, 2024), particularly those that rely heavily on written narrative. Traditional written reflections are increasingly vulnerable to AI-assisted fabrication, raising concerns about authorship, authenticity, and the integrity of learners' meaning-making processes Lehane & Wright, 2024. This challenge foregrounds the importance of self-authorship as both a developmental goal and an assessment principle. By requiring learners to select, curate, and explain visual artefacts that represent their learning, Photovoice prompts them to engage in a multimodal construction of meaning that goes beyond text. The requirement to produce images that are personally situated, captured in specific spaces, contexts, and moments, and to articulate the reasoning behind those choices demands a level of presence, ownership, and narrative coherence that cannot easily be outsourced. Performing this reflective work through images and accompanying commentary encourages learners to articulate "why this image, in this way, for this learning moment?", making the reflective process more embodied and intentional.

These multimodal demands expose current limits of GenAI tools. Caffagni et al., (2026), contend that AI's multimodal alignment or the matching images to text in a meaningfully way remains unreliable. While large language models can generate coherent essays, they struggle to fabricate authentic, personally grounded visual narratives. Even when learners use AI-generated images, inconsistencies between the imagery and the student's lived reality often become immediately apparent. As a result, Photovoice potentially increases the authenticity threshold for reflective work, possibly making academic misconduct more difficult and less appealing.

The following section outlines how Photovoice was implemented within a Business Ethics module and

concludes with the presentation of the learner's experience data and a reflection on the process by the author. The intention is twofold: to contribute to the limited body of literature exploring Photovoice as an academic assessment tool, and to advance a broader conversation on how Photovoice can serve as a catalyst for the development of self-authorship within higher education.

Methodology

Existing literature identifies Photovoice as a participatory visual methodology that enables participants to document, interpret, and communicate aspects of their lived experiences through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). Originally developed within community-based participatory research, Photovoice is recognised for promoting critical reflection, participant empowerment, experiential knowledge construction, and dialogue around personally meaningful issues (Wang & Burris, 1997). While these methodological strengths have been extensively explored within research settings, comparatively little evidence exists regarding whether these benefits can be effectively transferred into higher education assessment contexts.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was twofold. First, it sought to explore whether the core methodological merits associated with Photovoice, including critical reflection, learner agency, and personal meaning-making, could be replicated when Photovoice is used as an assessment strategy rather than solely a research method. Second, it aimed to determine the practical feasibility of implementing Photovoice within a formal assessment framework in higher education. Given the limited empirical evidence in this area, an exploratory mixed-methods design was considered appropriate for generating an initial evidence base from which the pedagogical value, scalability, and future assessment potential of Photovoice could be evaluated (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participants

Following completion of the assessment, learners were invited to participate in an anonymous online questionnaire exploring their experiences of using Photovoice as an assessment tool. Participation was entirely voluntary.

Overall, 28.98% of eligible learners responded to the survey. Response rates were 38.46% within Cohort 1 (10 out of 26 learners) and 23.25% within Cohort 2 (10 out of 43 learners), resulting in a total sample of 20 participants from a possible population of 69 students.

Although modest in size, the sample was considered sufficient for the exploratory aims of the study. The objective was not statistical generalisation but rather a contextualised understanding of learners' experiences of Photovoice assessment. Such an approach is consistent with interpretivist research traditions, which prioritise depth of understanding over representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the relatively homogeneous nature of the cohort provides opportunities for identifying meaningful patterns within participant accounts despite the limited sample size.

Research Design

A mixed-methods questionnaire was developed specifically for this study to evaluate learners' perceptions of Photovoice as an assessment approach. Mixed-methods designs are particularly valuable when researchers seek both breadth of understanding through quantitative measures and depth of insight through qualitative accounts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The questionnaire was structured around two principal constructs. 1) Learners' perceived understanding of module content following participation in the Photovoice assessment and 2) Learners' perceptions of Photovoice as a pedagogical tool for supporting reflection and learning. The questionnaire design was informed by literature relating to reflective learning and Photovoice methodology. Particular attention was paid to dimensions frequently associated with Photovoice, including personal connection to learning, critical reflection, and learner voice (Wang & Burris, 1997). The questionnaire included a series of closed-response items designed to measure perceived understanding, engagement, and usefulness of the

assessment activity. In addition, open-ended questions invited learners to elaborate on their experiences and explain how Photovoice influenced both their learning and reflective writing. The inclusion of qualitative questions enabled participants to provide richer and more nuanced accounts than would have been possible through quantitative measures alone, reflecting established recommendations for mixed-methods inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two complementary stages. Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency and distribution. This provided an overview of overall patterns within student perceptions and enabled evaluation of the extent to which learners believed Photovoice supported both conceptual understanding and reflective engagement. Qualitative responses were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and its suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across participant accounts while remaining theoretically adaptable to exploratory research contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis followed several iterative stages. Responses were first read repeatedly to facilitate familiarisation with the dataset. Initial codes were then generated to capture meaningful segments relating to learning benefits, reflective processes, challenges, and perceptions of the assessment method. These codes were subsequently reviewed and organised into broader themes reflecting shared patterns across participants. Themes were refined through ongoing engagement with the data and interpreted in relation to the study's research aims.

Reflexive Analysis

In addition to analysing student responses, the study incorporated a reflexive component focused on evaluating Photovoice through the lens of Baxter Magolda's (2021) framework of self-authorship by the author Specifically, the analysis considered:

Does Photovoice validate learners as knowers?

Does Photovoice situate learning within learners' own experiences?

Does Photovoice enable mutually constructed learning?

Reflexivity represents a central principle of qualitative inquiry, requiring researchers to critically examine how their assumptions, experiences, values, and positionality shape both the research process and the interpretation of findings (Finlay, 2002). Rather than viewing researcher influence as a source of contamination, reflexive approaches acknowledge that knowledge is co-constructed and situated within specific social and educational contexts (Finlay, 2002).

Within the present study, reflexive writing served two interconnected purposes. First, it enhanced transparency by making explicit the assumptions and perspectives that informed methodological decisions. Second, it provided an opportunity to critically evaluate how Photovoice functioned as a pedagogical intervention and how learners appeared to navigate processes associated with self-authorship.

Through this reflexive lens, the analysis explores the extent to which Photovoice aligns with Baxter Magolda's (2021) principles of self-authorship, offering a theoretically informed account of its potential to support intellectual, personal, and moral development within higher education assessment.

The combined analyses provide an understanding of learners' experiences and enabled triangulation across different forms of evidence. Such integration is a recognised strength of mixed methods approaches because it facilitates a more holistic understanding of complex educational phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines and relevant national standards governing research involving human participants. Ethical approval was granted by the

University's Research Ethics Committee (reference omitted for anonymous review).

Participation was entirely voluntary. All potential participants received detailed written information outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. No incentives were offered for participation. Importantly, participation or non-participation had no influence on academic progression, assessment outcomes, or relationships with teaching staff.

Given the visual origins of Photovoice methodology, ethical considerations relating to representation, confidentiality, and participant protection are particularly important (Wang & Burris, 1997). To safeguard privacy, data collection procedures were designed to ensure anonymity. No identifying information, including names, student numbers, IP addresses, or demographic variables capable of enabling re-identification, was collected.

All data were securely stored on university-approved servers in accordance with institutional data management policies. Only anonymised and aggregated findings are reported. These procedures ensured adherence to established principles of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and minimisation of risk.

Researcher Positionality and Potential Bias

As a practitioner-researcher occupying the dual role of teacher and investigator, I recognise that my position within the educational setting inevitably influences the research process. Qualitative researchers have long acknowledged that data collection and interpretation are shaped by the relationships, assumptions, and experiences of those conducting the research (Finlay, 2002).

My professional commitment to innovative pedagogical practice and interest in reflective learning create the possibility of confirmation bias, particularly in relation to interpreting evidence of the intervention's effectiveness. Equally, my familiarity with the module context may lead me to privilege certain interpretations over others.

To mitigate these risks, I sought to engage in ongoing reflexive practice throughout the research process, documenting assumptions, critically examining interpretations, and situating findings within the wider literature. The use of transparent analytical procedures and established methodological frameworks further supported the trustworthiness of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Finlay, 2002).

I also remain cautious about attributing changes in student engagement or learning outcomes solely to the intervention itself. Student experiences are shaped by multiple interacting social, institutional, and contextual influences. Consequently, any positive outcomes reported should be interpreted as indicative rather than causal and understood within the constraints of a small-scale exploratory study.

Context for the Assessment

Upon assuming responsibility for a Business Ethics module that had historically prioritised abstract theoretical orientations, I sought to recalibrate the curriculum toward a more explicitly applied ethical framework. While normative ethics (Warenski, 2024) and meta-ethics (Kagan, 1992) remain indispensable for grounding learners in the conceptual architecture of moral philosophy, their dominance within the previous iteration of the module often distanced learners from the ethical complexities encountered in contemporary organisational life. In response, I introduced an approach informed by applied ethics (Beauchamp, 2007), repositioning ethical analysis in relation to concrete, context-specific dilemmas. This shift enabled learners to interrogate moral issues as they occur in the “here and now,” as well as within the context of their degree of study, thereby promoting an authentic learning environment aligned with Herrington’s (2014) conception of experiential relevance.

Along with reorienting the curriculum, I was motivated to design an assessment strategy that moved away from conventional, text-based formats, particularly the traditional essay, which tends to reward the reproduction of theoretical detail rather than critical engagement or reflective practice. My aim was to create an assessment that required learners to meaningfully integrate course concepts

with their own experiences and observations, thereby advancing deeper understanding through application rather than memorisation. By foregrounding reflective synthesis and real-world relevance, the redesigned assessment sought to cultivate a more engaged, critical, and ethically attuned learner.

So how did it go?

What the Learners Thought

The preliminary findings indicate a notably positive learner response and offer strong support for the author's hypothesis that Photovoice can facilitate personal expression, critical reflection, and the demonstration of conceptual understanding.

Teaching ethics, particularly to learners encountering the subject for the first time, presents well-documented challenges (Patel et al, 2024). Abstract moral concepts, the demand for both critical and reflective thinking, and the emotional intelligence required to engage with complex dilemmas (Andrade, et al 2024). This challenge is exacerbated by the need for learners to draw upon their sociological imagination to situate ethical reasoning within broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

Against this backdrop, the learners experience data illustrate that the Photovoice-informed assessment supported learners in bridging theoretical and applied dimensions of ethical reasoning. When asked whether the assessment helped make meaningful connections between ethical theory and its real-world application, 100% of all respondents answered in the affirmative. This unanimity may reflect the extent to which the assessment design allowed learners to anchor their analysis in lived experience, thereby enhancing the relevance and interpretability of the theoretical materials.

Additionally, 95% of learners reported that the Photovoice approach enhanced their critical consciousness of business ethics, aligning closely with the goals of self-authorship, which Kreber (2007, p. 30) characterises as the capacity to navigate "intellectual, moral, and personal complexity." By grounding ethical analysis in personal reflection and using the photograph as a referential artefact, learners indicated an increased ability to recognise social and political contradictions, both in the external world and within their own ethical assumptions. 90% affirmed that the method made otherwise abstract ethical concepts more tangible, thereby strengthening the argument that Photovoice supports better comprehension through experiential engagement.

Learners' perceptions of their performance and engagement within the assessment were similarly positive. 85% of participants reported that incorporating Photovoice increased their engagement with the module materials, a finding consistent with prior scholarship by Carnahan (2006). Moreover, 95% of respondents felt that Photovoice enabled them to express their ethical views more effectively than they would have through a traditional assessment such as an essay. 85% indicated that the assessment prompted them to think more critically about their writing, suggesting that Photovoice not only enhanced engagement but also encouraged more sophisticated analytical practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Photovoice offers a meaningful and pedagogically robust alternative to conventional reflective assessment approaches in ethics education. By enabling learners to draw on personal experience, express complex ideas creatively, and engage more deeply with theoretical content, the approach appears to support heightened critical consciousness, enhanced conceptual understanding, and greater learner engagement. The overwhelmingly positive feedback further indicates that Photovoice fosters a sense of agency, authenticity, and reflective capacity among learners. As such, this method shows considerable promise as a pedagogical strategy capable of bridging abstract ethical theory with real-world application, thereby enriching both the learning process and the learner's development as an ethically informed practitioner.

What I Thought

Before turning to how I perceived the influence that Photovoice had on development of

self-authorship, it is important to acknowledge that the method is most effective when assessment aims require learners to engage critically with theoretical constructs, interrogate the self, or analyse their position in relation to contemporary ethical issues. Photovoice is particularly well suited to such purposes because it invites learners to situate abstract ideas within the lived realities of their social worlds, thereby fostering critical examination grounded in personal experience (Leathwood, 2005; Hanesworth, Bracken & Elkington, 2019).

The following considers the alignment between the performance of learner's work using Photovoice, and the three dimensions of self-authorship as articulated by Baxter Magolda (2001):

1. Does Photovoice validate learners as knowers?
2. Does Photovoice situate learning within the learner's own experience?
3. Does Photovoice create conditions for mutually constructed learning.

1. Does Photovoice validate learners as knowers? – Yes.

Photovoice's capacity to validate learners as legitimate knowers mirrors its well-documented effect in research contexts, where participants' voices, insights, and lived experiences form the central analytic material. When used as an assessment tool, Photovoice affords learners the same epistemic agency. By drawing on their own experiences as evidence of understanding and as illustrations of theoretical application, learners are positioned not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active interpreters of knowledge.

This validation is a critical component of self-authorship. Photovoice enables learners to claim ownership of their knowledge by demonstrating that their experiences are valuable analytical resources rather than peripheral anecdotes. As learners connect theory to personal or observed realities, they engage in a form of learning that is simultaneously personal, authentic, and intellectually rigorous. This process allows for deeper cognitive engagement, as reflecting on familiar experiences often enables more nuanced insight than analysing distant, abstract scenarios that hold little personal resonance. Several students described feeling more able to articulate their own perspectives through the method, noting for example that, "I found I was able to express my feelings a lot better", which suggests that Photovoice legitimised their personal ways of knowing.

2. Does Photovoice situate learning in the learner's experiences? – Yes.

One of Photovoice's defining strengths is its ability to situate learning squarely within the learner's own lived experiences. By using a photograph as a visual representation of an experience, concern, or ethical tension that is meaningful to the learner, the assessment becomes grounded in the everyday realities from which learners make sense of the world.

This grounding transforms what might otherwise be perceived as unfamiliar or abstract ethical problems into concepts that feel relevant and intelligible. In doing so, Photovoice bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and lived experience, promoting deeper comprehension, and supporting the development of self-authorship. When learners draw connections between academic content and their own experiences, learning becomes more meaningful and more likely to influence their future reasoning and decision-making Learning was also clearly grounded in individual experience, with one student reflecting that the task "made me have to think about my ethics" and another explaining that particular images "made me realise I didn't agree with that ethical standpoint", indicating that the method prompted deep, experience-based reflection.

3. Does Photovoice allow for learning as mutually constructed? – Yes.

Mutually constructed learning lies at the heart of Photovoice. The method invites learners to co-create meaning by interpreting their experiences through the lens of theory and by shaping the narrative that emerges from the chosen image. Rather than responding to a prescriptive prompt with

predetermined expectations, learners navigate the assessment through their own interpretive choices, crafting an argument that is both theoretically grounded and personally constructed.

The photograph serves as a catalyst for this process. It provides a visual anchor from which learners generate analysis, articulate their perspective, and construct the narrative of their assessment. Because the learner determines how the photograph will be used to explore ethical concepts, and because success is measured by the quality of analysis rather than conformity to a predetermined answer, the assessment becomes co-created between educator and learner. This aligns closely with Baxter Magolda's (2021) assertion that self-authorship requires learning environments in which authority and knowledge are shared, enabling learners to construct, not merely complete their work.

In sum, Photovoice aligns strongly with the principles of self-authorship by validating learners' voices, grounding learning in lived experiences, and facilitating mutually constructed understanding. As an assessment tool, it offers a powerful alternative to traditional methods by creating the conditions necessary for learners to develop as reflective, autonomous, and critically engaged knowers. Although explicit references to collaborative construction were limited, there were hints of creative co-creation express such as "I liked how it made me think more creatively… it was a nice change to have a different type of assignment" as well as "It made me think more creatively instead of just writing a plain old essay…" While not explicitly collaborative the statement indicates that the method values the learner's own interpretive and creative capacities.

Additional Thoughts

Drawing on my experience with traditional assessment methods and comparing them with the implementation of Photovoice, I have observed several notable advantages, particularly in learners' ability to demonstrate comprehension in a subject as conceptually demanding as ethics. For many learners, this Business Ethics module represents their first sustained engagement with moral philosophy, and preconceived notions about the discipline often lead them to disengage, perceiving the content as abstract, irrelevant, or disconnected from their present or future professional identities.

My intention in redesigning the assessment was therefore not to elicit rote reproduction of philosophical definitions but to cultivate what might be termed "philosophical practitioners", learners capable of applying ethical reasoning to contemporary, contextually grounded dilemmas. The aspiration was to equip learners not only with the competence of ethical managerial decision-making, the capacity "to do", but with the reflective and normative orientation necessary to interrogate the "should we" dimensions of professional practice.

The introduction of the Photovoice assessment coincided with an increase in overall module completion rates. Notably, the few failures recorded since implementation were attributable not to academic performance but to non-submission, and even these instances have decreased over time. The academic performance over the three years averaged a 62.48 (2.1) showing a consistently strong levels of academic achievement. The consistency in the marks highlights the stability of photovoice as an assessment tool as well as photovoice ability to establish academic flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Although the ultimate outcomes were positive, the process was not without challenges. Initial learner reactions were ambivalent. In my decade of teaching in higher education, I have observed increasing assessment focus and risk aversion among learners, particularly when confronted with assignments that deviate from traditional formats. This tendency is heightened in modules assessed solely through a single summative task, where learners often prioritise perceived safety over intellectual experimentation. Yet it is often within such moments of discomfort that the most meaningful learning occurs. Assessments should challenge learners, but not to the extent that they inhibit participation. The most significant obstacle encountered was learners' difficulty in articulating their ideas metaphorically, a skill essential to Photovoice, where the photograph serves as both symbol and analytic lens.

A central challenge in using Photovoice for reflective assessment is that it implicitly assumes learners possess a level of visual literacy that may not be evenly distributed across cohorts. Photovoice requires learners not only to take photographs but to interpret, analyse, and narrate meaning through visual media. However, visual literacy skills vary significantly across learners. Even in pedagogical contexts, the literature notes that visual methods require careful introduction because learners may not initially understand how to construct meaning through imagery (Schell et al., 2009). Aboulkacem et al (2021) emphasises that those engaging in the use visual artifacts need a level of understanding in visual and privacy literacy, but these are not universal and often need explicit scaffolding which could contribute to possible ethical concerns. This uneven visual literacy can result in inequitable assessment outcomes. Learners who are more artistically inclined, or simply more familiar with digital visual culture, may be advantaged, even though the task is intended to assess conceptual understanding rather than technical skill. To help address this issue, I designed specific lectures / workshops on visual analysis, visual metaphors as well as address issues around privacy and ethics of photography. I also encouraged students to share their photos and proposed narratives prior to writing, ensuring that they were writing from a place of confidence.

Additionally, Photovoice hinges on the idea that images can communicate lived experiences. Yet what is considered appropriate, expressive, or symbolically meaningful varies widely across cultural contexts. Photovoice literature itself acknowledges that visual imagery is embedded in "wider cultural perceptions, categories, and metaphors" that shape interpretation (Schell et al., 2009).

Cultural literacy studies using Photovoice show that interpretation of images is strongly tied to culturally specific norms and symbolic understanding (Strauba et al., 2024). In cross-cultural teaching contexts, visual data can be misread by educators who interpret images through their own cultural lens, risking mis-assessment of intended meaning (Wang, 2020) even if the learners provides a written narrative that supports the image. As such, it was important that I avoided grading the image itself; instead, focus the evaluation and feedback on the student's articulation of meaning.

Finally, the assumption that all learners possess adequate technology (camera-equipped smartphones, editing tools) creates additional inequities. Photovoice has historically been implemented with support structures (e.g., equipment loaning), which may not be present in an assessment setting (Wang, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1994, Wang 2020. To mitigate this, I assessed the technological demands placed on students and recognise that unequal device access may undermine inclusive participation, as such I allowed student to submit drawing, collage, or found images via the internet to be used as visual artifacts.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to business ethics pedagogy by extending the emerging literature on Photovoice as an assessment tool and situating it within Baxter Magolda's framework of self-authorship. In doing so, it offers conceptual grounding for why Photovoice is not merely a creative reflective exercise but a theoretically aligned method that supports learners in constructing meaning, articulating ethical standpoints, and connecting abstract concepts to lived experience. By demonstrating how the principles of participation, empowerment, and critical reflection inherent in Photovoice translate into assessment design, the paper reinforces its legitimacy as a structured and pedagogically robust approach within business ethics education.

Empirically, the findings suggest that Photovoice deepens learner engagement, enhances conceptual understanding, and promotes a stronger sense of agency during reflective tasks. Learners reported improved ability to apply ethical theories to real-world dilemmas, greater confidence in positioning themselves as "knowers," and an appreciation for the inclusivity and authenticity of the format. However, the evidence remains preliminary and limited by a single-institution sample, reliance on self-reported data, and the absence of direct

comparison to traditional assessment formats such as essays. Greater methodological triangulation and larger, more diverse cohorts would help validate the observed benefits and clarify when and for whom Photovoice is most effective.

Future research should therefore examine Photovoice against conventional assessments to determine relative gains in ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and self-authorship development. Longitudinal studies could track how Photovoice influences learners' trajectories across the stages of self-authorship over time, while cross-cultural investigations would illuminate how social, cultural, and disciplinary contexts shape learners' interpretations and expressive practices. Such comparative and longitudinal work would help establish Photovoice not only as an innovative alternative but as a rigorously evidenced assessment strategy within the broader landscape of business ethics pedagogy.

In sum, this study demonstrates that Photovoice offers a compelling and conceptually robust alternative to traditional reflective assessment practices. The insights generated here make a meaningful contribution to emerging discussions of innovative assessment practices in higher education. They point to Photovoice's capacity not only to deepen ethical understanding but also to support the development of learners who are critically aware, self-reflective, and better prepared to navigate the moral, professional, and civic complexities of contemporary life. By integrating visual inquiry with reflective academic discourse, it bridges the longstanding divide between theory and praxis, empowering learners to articulate the ethical dimensions of their world with greater clarity, creativity, and authenticity.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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