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To cite this article: Veronica M. Richard & Maria K.E. Lahman (2015) Photo-elicitation: reflexivity on method, analysis, and graphic portraits, *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 38:1, 3-22, DOI: [10.1080/1743727X.2013.843073](https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2013.843073)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2013.843073>



Published online: 04 Apr 2014.



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Photo-elicitation: reflexivity on method, analysis, and graphic portraits

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(Received 8 November 2011; final version received 17 June 2013)

In this methodological discussion, the authors detail and reflect on the processes of using photo-elicitation interviewing as a way to align with positive qualitative methodologies, to gain access to participant beliefs and values, and to highlight participant voices through their choices of words and visuals. A review of the literature and an overview of the educational research experiences leading to the discussion are included. Next, the discoveries regarding what is methodologically new and/or valuable concerning this visual method is presented. In the final section, the authors reflexively contemplate aspects of visual methodological processes in an effort to address methodological crossroads of potential and tension including: (1) the potential of *decontextualized photos*, (2) photos as metaphors of meaning, (3) photos as representations of inherent meaning, (4) participant empowerment, and (5) graphic representation or *graphic portraits*.

Keywords: graphic portrait; photo-elicitation; qualitative; visual methodology; decontextualized photo sets

‘This is a really good idea’, Music Man says. ‘The photos give you so much more to think about’. He continues perusing the photographs.

‘Some days, some days’, he replies in reference to a photo. [Laughing] ‘They are some good pictures! It is funny, I think of different questions and all of these pictures mean different things. It’s awesome! Awesome!’

If I were smart I would have made two piles [seemingly to himself]

I am sorry, I was trying to make it quicker and it is probably . . . I [Veronica] say.

No, this is cool! Unless you got somewhere to be.

Nowhere but here! I say smiling at his engagement in the photos.

Music Man, lays out the photos he has chosen to illustrate his thoughts about student teaching high school music. Animatedly he describes how a photo depicting a train track fading into the distance captures his sense of direction and focus. I am fully captivated caught up in his score, the visual of the photo and his hands seemingly beating time to the cadence of

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his voice, blending all aspects of this data collection method into a metaphorical melody (Taken from photo-elicitation interview transcriptions by the author, Veronica.).

In this methodological article, we detail and reflect on Veronica's experiences using photo-elicitation interviewing as a way to align with positive qualitative methodologies (e.g. portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1997) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008)), to gain access to participant beliefs and values, and to highlight participant voices through their choices of words and visuals. We first detail the background of our current understandings of photo-elicitation, providing a review of the literature and an overview of the research experiences leading to this discussion. Second, we provide our discoveries regarding what is methodologically new and/or valuable concerning this visual method. In the final section, we reflexively contemplate aspects of visual methodological processes in an effort to address the methodological crossroads full of potential and tension: (1) the potential of *decontextualized photos*, (2) photos as metaphors of meaning, (3) photos as representations of inherent meaning, (4) participant empowerment, and (5) graphic representation or *graphic portraits*.

Background

Photo-elicitation interviewing

The method of interviewing becomes a necessity when, as Patton (2002) said, we mean to call attention to that which we cannot observe. This rationale speaks to moments when researchers want to capture participants' 'feelings, thoughts, intentions', previous behaviours or the ways in which people organize their mental understandings and then connect these understandings to their world (Patton 2002, 341). As depicted in the opening vignette, adding photographs during an interview not only provides a way to elicit additional information, but this interviewing technique also offers a visual dimension to the unobservable thoughts, feelings, experiences, and understandings Patton (2002) referred to as reasons for using interviewing methods in the first place. In the following section, we provide the fundamental background information on photo-elicitation. Although not exhaustive, we include: (1) a history of visuals as used in social research, (2) one definition of photo-elicitation, and (3) several methodological issues of photo-elicitation methods, including the uses and benefits of the methods and the decision-making process concerns in using photo-elicitation methods.

Brief history of visuals in social research

In the late nineteenth century, social science researchers initially used photographs to supplement or elaborate further on ideas and understandings represented through written expression (e.g. Banks 2007; Collier 1957; Harper 1994; Norman 1991). Being meshed with the quantitative realm of research, researchers used photographs to 'objectively' record, calculate, document, and compare written 'facts' visually (Collier 1957, 1967, 1995; Norman 1991), serving as a marginal or redundant tool (Harper 1994). During this time, researchers had yet to see photography as a way to gain emotional and cognitive information or as a way to explore the intriguing subjectivity brought forth through visual metaphors (Becker 1998; Collier 1957). This pattern changed, however, and researchers began implementing photo-elicitation methods. In the process, researchers redefined the role of photography in social research, classified the method variations, and identified and justified its uses and purposes.

Photo-elicitation defined

The method of photo-elicitation interviewing may be defined as an interviewing technique in which researchers elicit information from participants by using photographs (e.g. Blinn and Harrist 1991; Collier 1967; Prosser and Schwartz 1998). Historically, the photos used in interviewing held some significance for participants (Collier 1967; Prosser and Schwartz 1998) so the participants then could discuss their interpretation (Blinn and Harrist 1991). Due to this tradition, two primary variations of photo-elicitation exist, both of which involve photos from the research setting: researcher-generated photographs and participant-generated photographs.

If researcher-generated, variations of photo-elicitation include: (1) current photos taken of the research setting and topic of study, (2) previously taken photos of the setting and topic of study (Banks 2001), (3) archival photos of the research setting and topic of study also known as found photographs (Bogdan and Biklen 1992), and (4) previously taken photos with no contextual or topical connection to the research which we term as *decontextualized photos*. Numerous researchers (e.g. Banks 2001; Blinn and Harrist 1991; Collier 1967; Prosser and Schwartz 1998) identified the first three variations. To our knowledge, only Banks (2001, 2007) and Blinn and Harrist identified the fourth type of researcher-generated or decontextualized photographs with Banks classifying this form as the most uncommon and problematic due to the lack of contextual ties he argued that were necessary to keep the interview focused.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, participant-generated photographs grew in popularity (Bogdan and Biklen 1992). Because researchers started to question whether their choice in photographs matched what participants would choose, research involving participant-generated photographs gained momentum (Deal and Fox 2006; Radley and Taylor 2003; Samuels 2004). Asking participants to take photographs in response to a question or prompt provided a means to gain insight (Samuels) and to empower participants (e.g. Deal and Fox 2006; McLaren 2009; Radley and Taylor 2003).

Methodological issues of photo-elicitation

Methodological issues of photo-elicitation methods include researchers' insight on uses, benefits, and field processes. From the findings of Collier (1967) concerning the projective characteristics of photo-elicitation to the current findings of visual researchers, various uses and benefits of photo-elicitation interview processes have been identified. Collier originally contended photographs served as a tool through which participants could share their knowledge and through which intense feeling and truths could be realized and shared. In 1986, Collier and Collier expanded the potential of photo-elicitation processes by adding the possibilities of overcoming illiteracy, promoting fluent thought processes, and providing a sense of familiarity and comfort during the interview process, all of which could lead to awareness and action towards individual and social change.

Suchar (1989, 177) identified three main uses of the photo-elicitation interview: (1) to reveal participants' cultural understandings, (2) to reveal aspects of participants' 'social psychology', and (3) to examine participants' understandings of their thoughts and actions in social situations. Harper (1994) and Collier (1995) added that photo-elicitation interviewing serves as a model of collaboration between the participant and the researcher. In this collaboration, the interview dialogue is 'stimulated and guided by the

images' (Harper 1994, 410) and the particulars of the context is accounted for through the photos and the corresponding dialogue (Collier 1995). Prosser and Schwartz (1998, 124) claimed that the method could be used to 'explore participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings' and to trigger suppressed memories or understandings of memories and social systems, something Collier (1957) noted 40 years earlier. Prosser and Schwartz (1998) also believed that context-specific photographs could show indescribable attributes of people, objects, situations, and phenomena; subtle or unnoticed relationships; and the various dimensions of ways of knowing.

Considering the decision-making and process aspects of photo-elicitation, Banks (2001) contended researchers should decide to use the method to sharpen memories, to provide focus for the interview, to ameliorate awkward interview situations, to enable participants to formalize abstractions and generalizations, and to promote participant agency. Taking these uses together, Banks believed photo-elicitation processes 'enabled people to do and think things they had forgotten, or to see things they had always known in a new way' (2001, 95). Harper (2002) advocated for the value of black and white photographs to elicit more memories and for the potential of photo-elicitation techniques to evoke emotional responses and alleviate interview fatigue, researcher-participant miscommunication, and lack of shared backgrounds. Considering these rationales for implementing photo-elicitation interviewing together, Banks (2007) contended the strength in visual methods rests in its open-ended, exploratory, revelatory, and empowering characteristics. See Table 1 for a summary of the uses and benefits of photo-elicitation interviewing by researcher.

Various researchers (e.g. Banks 2001, 2007; Blinn and Harrist 1991; Collier 1967; Radley and Taylor 2003) have provided methodological discussions and process concerns in reference to decisions in research design, photograph production, and data collection. Issues affecting photograph production include access and ethical concerns such as informed consent and who or what can and cannot be photographed – that is, what is appropriate and safe for the participants and the particular setting (e.g. Collier and Collier 1986; Prosser 1998; Radley and Taylor 2003). The skill of the photographer whether researcher or participant, inherent costs, and time issues also come into play with the generation and use of photograph methods (e.g. Clark-Ibáñez 2007; Prosser 1998).

Prosser (1998) drew attention to decisions regarding specific interview processes and the importance of an audit trail including information on the photographs used (how the photographs originated) and the processes with participants – that is, how the researcher and participants used the photographs. Subsequent researchers have indicated the magnitude of these process decisions: photographs taken early in the data collection phase (e.g. Blinn and Harrist 1991; MacDonald 2008), taken late in the data collection phase (e.g. Collier 1957; Norman 1991), taken by the researcher (e.g. Gold 2007; Prosser 1998), taken or generated (i.e. photo artefacts) by the participants (e.g. Blinn and Harrist 1991; Samuels 2004).

Photograph content is also of researcher concern. This concern brought about insight on photographs dealing with the research context – photographs of the research setting and related people (e.g. Prosser 1998; Samuels 2004), participant self-portraits (Deal and Fox 2006); contextual photographs accompanied with writing (Blinn and Harrist 1991; Deal and Fox 2006), photographs of the research topic but not the context (e.g. museum photographs of textiles by Niessen 1991), and decontextualized photographs in which the researcher nor participants have any direct link to the photographs (Banks 2007; Richard 2011).

Table 1. Uses and benefits of photo-elicitation interviewing techniques by researcher.

Researcher	Use and/or benefit
Collier (1957)	Use photo-elicitation as a tool through which participants can • share knowledge and intense feelings • make realizations of suppressed feelings and beliefs
Collier and Collier (1986)	Photo-elicitation interviewing is beneficial because of its potential to • overcome participant illiteracy • provide a sense of familiarity and comfort for the participant • promote fluent thought processes • promote participant agency
Suchar (1989)	Use photo-elicitation to aid in participants • revealing cultural understandings and aspects of ‘social psychology’ (177) • examining their understandings, thoughts, and actions in social situations
Harper (1994) and Collier (1995)	Photo-elicitation interviewing is beneficial because of its potential to • serve as model of collaboration – participant to researcher • foster collaborative, participant-researcher dialogue ‘stimulated and guided by the images’ (Harper, 410) • particulars of the context accounted for through the photos and corresponding dialogue (Collier, 1995)
Prosser and Schwartz (1998)	Use photo-elicitation interviewing to • ‘explore participants’ values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings’ (124) • trigger suppressed memories or understandings of memories and social systems • show indescribable attributes, subtle/unnoticed relationships, and various participant truths
Banks (2001)	Use photo-elicitation interviewing to • sharpen memories • provide interview focus • ameliorate awkward interview situations • enable participants to formalize abstractions and generalizations • promote participant agency
Harper (2002)	Photo-elicitation interviewing is beneficial because of its potential to • elicit more memories (use of black and white photographs) • elicit emotional responses • alleviate interview fatigue and miscommunications • bridge the gap of different backgrounds
Banks (2007)	Photo-elicitation interviewing is beneficial because of its potential to foster • exploration and extended responses • revelation • empowering interactions

Overview of photo-elicitation research experiences

The following discussion stems from Veronica’s research experiences using photo-elicitation. In the four qualitative inquiries, the data collection methods of in-depth, semi-structured interviews (either one-on-one or focus group), observations, and artifacts were employed. The choice of including photo-elicitation interviewing methods matched the various studies’ methodological aims. For example, using the less popular decontextualized photographs (Banks 2007) accounted for past methodological

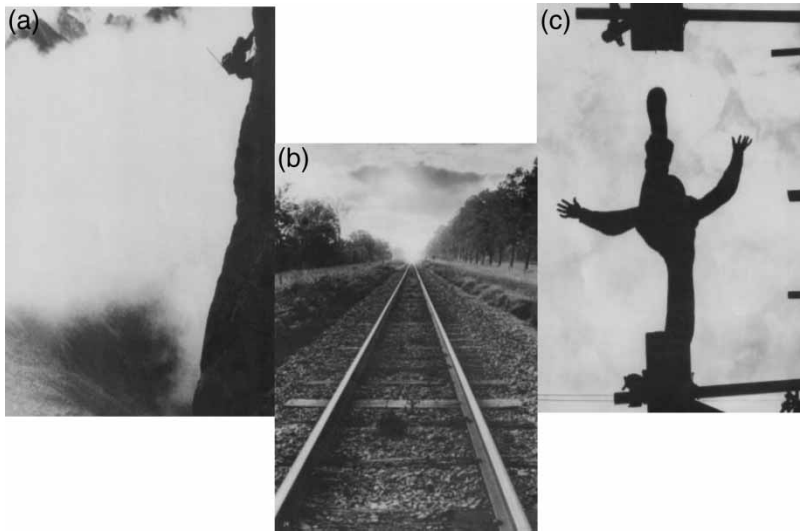


Figure 1. Photo montage of decontextualized black and white photo set. (a) The Mountain Climber: © 1986 The Catholic Leader. (b) Single Train Track: © 1986 The Catholic Leader. (c) Parachutist in training, Aldershot, UK c.1953: © 1953 David Moore courtesy David Moore Photography © Estate of David Moore (www.davidmoorephotography.com.au).

concerns of researcher- or participant-generated photographs, such as photographic skills, cost, and time. Deciding on a photo set not directly connected to the participants, the topics, or the settings established the desired focus on the interview questions and addressed past logistical and ethical limitations (e.g. Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Samuels 2004). The decontextualized photo set¹ used in each research process included 130 black and white photographs from Australia. The photographs were accompanied with one or more prompts to guide the participants' choices of photographs. A black and white photo set was chosen specifically to address gaps in previous studies in the ability to elicit feelings and memories (Harper 2002). See Figure 1 for a representative photomontage of the decontextualized photo set used (see the appendix for photograph information).

Drawing on past researcher's findings, all studies included photo-elicitation interviews during the initial interviews:

- to break the ice and ease interviewing tensions (e.g. Collier and Collier 1986);
- to highlight participant voices and perceptions (Collier 1967);
- to access participant background information, cultural beliefs, and experiences (e.g. Prosser and Schwartz 1998; Suchar 1989); and
- to represent positively new visual and written understandings, highlighting voices often minimized, devalued, or even silenced – that is, the focus was on what was working and 'good' as opposed to focusing on what needed fixing (Banks 2001, 2007; Geist, Lahman, and Rue 2008).

The studies differed in research setting, participants, and inquiry topic. The following is a brief description of each study referenced in this article.

- (1) *Abstinence programme evaluation*: A programme evaluation of an adolescent mentoring programme designed to discover information serving to improve

the practice of an abstinence programme. The study took place in a Western university in the USA for one week during the summer of 2007. Participants included adolescents from across the USA – 10 boys ranging from 8th grade to 11th grade and 9 girls ranging in age from 12 to 16 who participated in the programme annual conference. Photo-elicitation interviewing processes were used to bring about information regarding the pressures these young people face regarding risky behaviours (i.e. smoking, sex, drugs, and/or alcohol-related behaviours). Two rounds of gender-specific focus groups were conducted – one round pre-conference and one round post-conference (one week later).

- (2) *Content area literacy*: This study was designed to explore pre-service teachers and their understandings of content area literacy. The participants included three pre-service secondary content teachers, all of which were undergraduate students enrolled in a western university in the USA. Majoring in a specific content area (English, Music, and Physical Education), the participants were also enrolled in the university's Teacher Education Programme, earning a secondary teaching licensure or a K-12 teaching licensure. At the time of the study, the participants ranged in age from 23 to 24 and were in their final semester and final phase of the programme, the student teaching phase. Photo-elicitation interviewing was utilized during every interview, totalling between four and six interviews per person ranging from 30 to 115 minutes each.
- (3) *Training programme evaluation*: The third study was a 2010 formative programme evaluation of a training programme designed to teach in-service teachers and principals about valuing children, promoting courage to make cultural changes, and encouraging HIV/AIDS awareness. Participants included 36 South African adult educators and principals who participated in the training. Participants varied in age and teaching experience. The participants took part in one of eight focus groups consisting of not more than six people, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Photo-elicitation interviewing occurred at the beginning of the focus group and included 16 photographs from the black and white photo set – two photos per group. In this case, the photographs were chosen to break the ice and spark conversation.
- (4) *Teacher reflection*: This study explored pre-service and in-service teachers' perceptions on reflection. The study took place over three months during the spring of 2012 in a Mid-Western state of the USA. Participants included three graduate students ranging in age from 24 to 36 who were enrolled in an Urban Education Teaching Programme of a state university. All participants were in the final phase of their programme – student teaching phase. Photo-elicitation processes occurred during the initial and final interviews in which the same questions were asked.

Methodological discoveries in photo-elicitation methods

In using photo-elicitation interviewing, we had similar discoveries to past researchers who brought to light photo-elicitation's potential to social research: to build rapport (e.g. Blinn and Harrist 1991; Collier 1957; Gold 2007), to provide access to participants' lives (e.g. Clark-Ibáñez 2007), to provide shared experiences (Baker and Wang 2006), and to relieve the strain of direct, extended questioning and fatigue

(Blinn and Harrist 1991; Collier 1957; Samuels 2004). In the following sections, we present discoveries of how these photo-elicitation experiences extended or veered from the past researchers' findings. The sections include: (1) the potential of using decontextualized photo sets, (2) photographs as metaphors of meaning, (3) photographs as representations of inherent meaning, (4) the possibility for participant empowerment, and (5) graphic representation.

Potential of decontextualized photo sets

Past researchers exploring photo-elicitation interviewing have utilized either researcher- or participant-generated photographs. Unique to Veronica's experiences with photo-elicitation was the use of a decontextualized photo set; that is, a photo set not related to the research participants, topics, or settings. The decontextualized option not only adds credence to the aforementioned benefits found in using photo-elicitation interviewing but also gives researchers an alternate, less time consuming, and logistically simplistic source for photographs.

To begin, we discovered that using a set of established, decontextualized photographs unrelated to the people and the research topic or setting brings forth the possibility of the interview question(s) serving as the context. This potential became apparent when one participant said, 'When I think of the different questions, all of these pictures mean different things.' The fact that various participants given the same questions chose different photographs also speaks to the potential of the questions serving as the guide in their decision-making processes.

Another methodological realization in combining decontextualized photo sets with interviewing came with the versatility of the photo set. For example, the black and white photo set was utilized across ages, genders, cultures, nations, and varying research topics. The ability to cross boundaries with this decontextualized photo set speaks to the potential of repeated uses, of cost benefits, and of minimizing ethical dimensions often raised through researcher- or participant-generated photographs (e.g. what and/or who can and cannot be photographed and consent of non-participants being photographed).

Photographs as metaphors of meaning

The participants' visual choices and accompanying language served as sites of common metaphorical understandings. For example, in one interview a participant chose a number of photographs of roads and dirt tracks to help explain his beliefs of himself as a learner and a teacher. In these explanations, he referred metaphorically to roads and directions stating:

It's like, there's definitely an easy way to get from where we are right now to where we are going. You know, the road here, these tire tracks, that's going to be the easiest way to get there. Right? Now, with this [photo] especially, you can get there going any way you want to. It's just a matter of how much dedication you are going to put over it. If you come from over here [referencing rough part of the road], and do all of that stuff; it looks pretty rough and hard. . . . You try one thing, and it's like grrrrhhh that's not the right thing to do, and you are just all over the place. You are going in the right direction, but you are not focused.



Figure 2. Images as metaphors of meaning: Road with tyre marks © 1986 Peter Solness (www.solness.com.au).

As the interview continued without the photographs as tools, this participant continued using the metaphoric language established through the photographs, referring to paths and roads. ‘[I] try to figure out where [students] are along that path [and see] if I can show them an easier road’ (see Figure 2 for the corresponding photographs).

The next examples come from the training programme evaluation in South Africa training and encouraging educational leaders to make cultural changes, including valuing children and encouraging HIV/AIDS awareness. In this example, the participants chose a different photograph to share their beliefs about the programme. The first teacher participant shared:

The little boy . . . with the long stick in his hand is trying to reach for something up, maybe to bring it down. So, I have an idea that as he is trying to get the thing that is up, whatever it is. He needs to own that; he wants that thing to belong to him [so he] can have it for himself. My experiences with [programme] is that my students and I need to reach for the sky; we need to get what we want, what is hidden up there, which is unknown to us and then we will know it when it is within our reach.

Another teacher explained the programme and her visual choice in the following ways:

The picture of a train on a railway line . . . The implication and my understanding [of the programme] is that life is a journey. Sometimes if you look at it, you can understand the way you are going. But you have to keep on working; you have to have courage to continue and pursue, working until you see something helping you. If it looks as if there is no way, [no] hope, you miss a lot of things. But you have to have the belief that life itself is a journey, and you must take courage. . . . so understanding that life is a journey (See Figure 3 for the corresponding photograph).

In the abstinence programme evaluation, adolescent participants used the photos to voice their understandings of the programme and how the programme was



Figure 3. Single train track: © 1986 The Catholic Leader.

helping them to avoid risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking alcohol, doing drugs, and engaging in sexual activities. For example, in choosing a photo of a bird flying in the sky, one male adolescent discussed the necessity to rise ‘above the influence’ in order to keep his life together. Other adolescent boys used the images of railroad tracks, roads, or paths as metaphors for keeping on the right track in an effort to be happy. One of the adolescent girls chose a picture of a web to demonstrate her new found power after the conference: ‘Sometimes people feel as if they’re like trapped in a web . . . it’s like doom. But in people’s cases they can figure a way out. It’s their choice’ (see [Figure 4](#) for the corresponding photograph).

In these instances and many others, the images served as a common ground for meaning sharing and meaning constructing between the participant and the researcher and between the participants in the focus group settings. As such, the language established in the method of photo-elicitation becomes the referent through which participants explain their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs both in the moment and later in the interview. From the researcher point of view, the photograph becomes an added visual dimension of understanding in which the researcher



Figure 4. Spider web: © 1986 Anonymous.

fuses participants' language to establish and put forth participant meanings and understandings.

Photos as representations of inherent meaning

The potential of photographs conveying inherent meaning became apparent when Veronica realized numerous participants were choosing the same photographs and the language used in their descriptions showed similarities. This aspect of the pictures expressing meaning addresses what Norman (1991, 194) purported in researcher-generated photos as potential 'explanatory models' and what Radley and Taylor (2003) claimed of participant-generated photos as standalone data (i.e. visual data without verbal support). Although the participants used the photographs to explain their understandings of different topics, questions, or beliefs; they used common or related words or language conveying similar ideas.

For example, two pre-service teachers in the same study chose the photo of a man's face partially hidden in shadows. One teacher used the visual to describe how he was, 'Learning who I am', 'turning on the light', and 'learning who is behind the shadow'. The other teacher used the image to explain how she came to understand literacy in her content area and how she and other teachers are 'oblivious' and 'blind' to their abilities to use literacy practices, 'only see[ing] one part of literacy, think[ing] literacy [is] reading when it's so many other things' (Figure 5).

Similarly, two other pre-service teachers chose a photo of a robot playing a piano-type instrument. One participant used the photograph to explain his thoughts of students playing music with no thought, or robotically. The other participant referenced the photograph to convey his sense of despair in education and the lack of human agency caused by attention to testing as opposed to student needs. See the poetic representation shown in Figure 6 to gain a sense of their individual and combined understandings.

The similarity in language participants used to explain understandings due to choices in photographs also occurred across studies and across topics (literacy and reflection). In this instance, three teachers (two pre-service and one in-service) used a photograph of multiple railroad tracks coming together. The words they chose to use were (Figure 7):



Figure 5. Man's face with shadow of a cross: © 1986 Peter Solness (www.solness.com.au).

Robotic.

Going through the motions—
We started.
We stopped.
So much that we could have
worked on—

The human aspect?
Their minds are out of the
GAME.

Just turning a knob up and
down—

Without learning anything.

Physical Education?
Cutting it out.

CSAP scores—

Motor learning,
Moving,
Makes you a better learner.

Proven scientifically—
Perform better,
Proven—we need this.

Physical Education?
Cutting it out.

Figure 6. Poetic depiction of meanings conveyed through photographs.

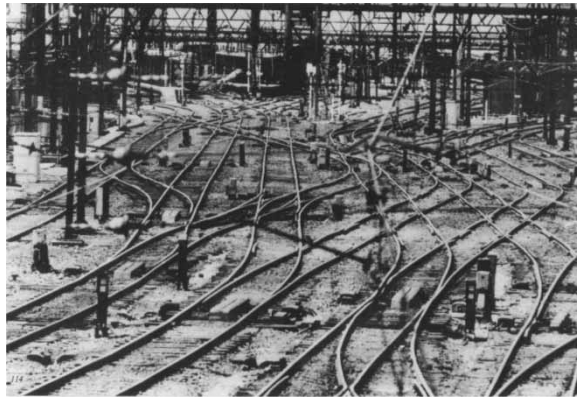


Figure 7. Major railway junction: © 1986 Fairfax Syndication.

In teaching, there are so many ways you could go. If things go well, you stay on that track. If it didn't, then you can switch gears. You have several options.

There are so many different ways to teach Language Arts. You can branch off and teach about writing, branch off and teach about reading, branch off and teach about literature, [or] branch off and teach about grammar.

All these train tracks and in the end, they all have destinations. Even though there are a million different ways to get there, it's all going to get there in the end and they all kind of work together.

Participant empowerment

Photo-elicitation interviewing methods also created an inherent dimension of empowerment through choice and justification; that is, participants made their own photo choices and naturally explained their thought processes or reasoning behind their choices, resulting in clarification of their thoughts and ideas. We believe this characteristic of photo-elicitation methods resulted in empowerment and promoted participants' agency in the interviewing processes, making the interview seem more participant-directed. For example, in explaining herself as a learner, one teacher unprompted stated, '[Let me] try to get this out, to think of my reasoning.' In essence, the visual aspect of the interviewing process seemed to prompt the participants to explain as opposed to needing additional prompting and prying from the researcher, which has the potential to slow down the interview or cause a sense of unease between the participants and researcher.

Graphic portrait representation

Drawing on the power of Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) portraiture methodology and its detail and description is the foundation of this powerful representation. When adding a visual dimension – not only of images but also of text structure – what we term as *graphic portraits*, researchers move research findings into another level of description and text modality.

Making decisions to focus on methodologies that are positive or that are in pursuit of goodness or what works (e.g. appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008) and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1997)) and to include visual methods to enhance the positive focus influences the final representations of research. In Veronica's experiences, the methodology provided a structure similar to that of

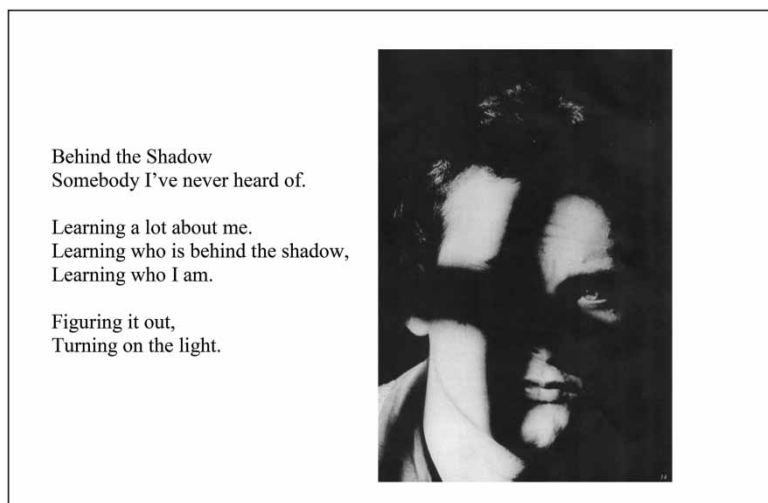


Figure 8. Sample graphic portrait. Man's face with shadow of a cross: © 1986 Peter Solness (www.solness.com.au).

Lawrence-Lightfoot's portraiture. In this way, the data collection methods provide the modality and representation of data. Coinciding with Lawrence-Lightfoot's thoughts of portraiture, we believe representation serves as a visual form used to evoke certain feelings and thoughts about subject matter that normally would not be included in traditional representations, thus adding to the level of transferability.

Deciding to honour participants and their understandings led to other decisions about the representation of data: Should themes be provided with the use of occasional quotations to support these themes? Should the participants' words speak for themselves? Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis claimed, 'The portraitist seeks to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience . . . hoping the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting readers will feel identified' (1997, 14). With this aim in mind, we began our work in presenting participants' actual words and accompanying photo choices structured around the research aims. For Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983, 1997, 2000), quotations were housed in a masterful, descriptive narrative. For us, methodological decisions served as the frame in which quotations became the narrative, transformed by visuals, poetry, and structural print features combined to form a graphic portrait of the participant understandings (see Figures 8 and 9 for sample pages of a graphic portrait).

Methodological crossroads full of potential and tension

Decontextualized photo sets

While the decontextualized photo set did account for methodological issues set forth by researchers using context-specific photographs (both researcher- and participant-generated), methodological concerns did arise. First, a potential tension with decontextualized photo sets originates from the conceivable instance in which the photographs do not match a participant's picture in her/his mind. Therefore, the interview reverts to a typical interview, minus the elicitation of photographs and perhaps with resulting confusion. While Veronica did experience this once, the participant was able to describe the picture she had conjured in her mind.

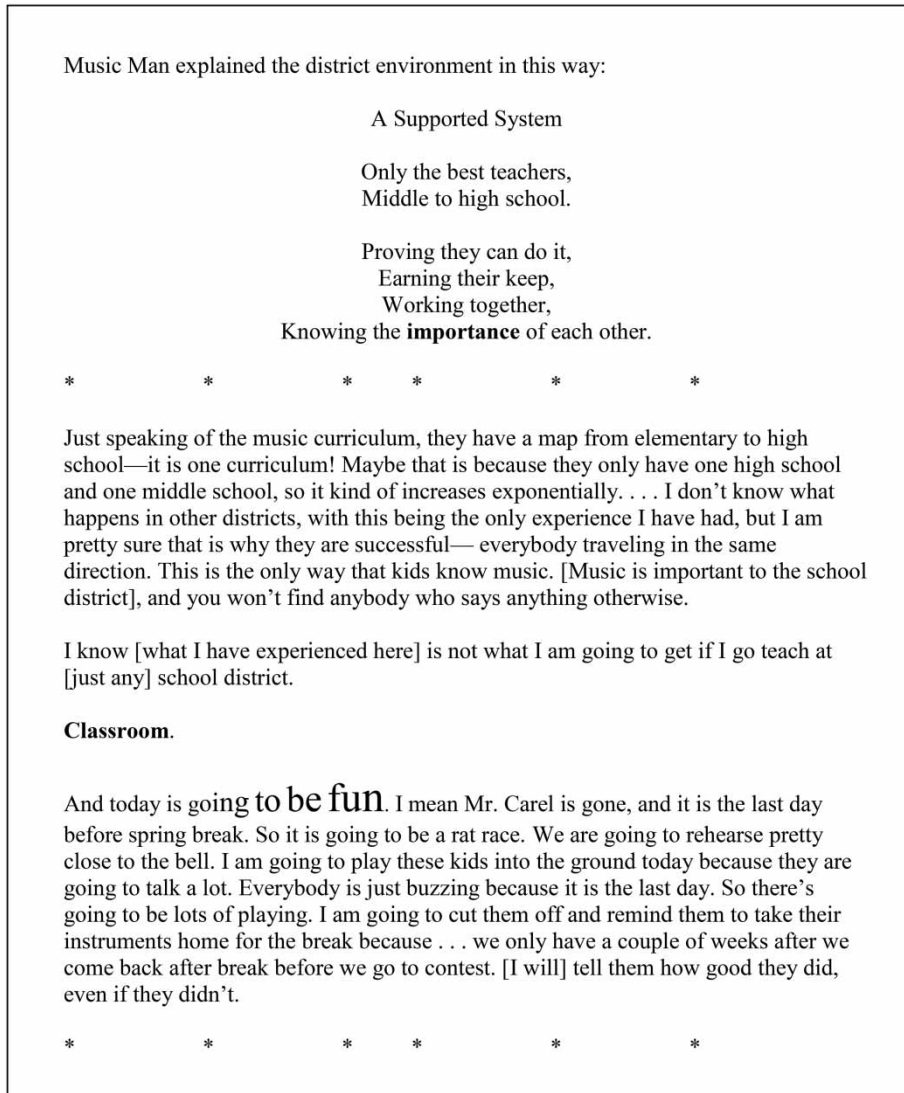


Figure 9. Sample portrait continued. Taken from Richard (2011, 166 and 170, respectively).

I have a picture in my head. I picture a ladder because I really had to think about this lesson in my head, step-by-step, the tiniest things because [with] the little tiny things . . . I really had to go step-by-step . . . start from the beginning and then [move] toward the end.

Although this instance worked out, our concerns are:

- How do we ensure the best possible set of photographs outside of context/field-based (participant- and researcher-generated) photo sets?
- What distinguishes between appropriate and inappropriate times to employ photo-elicitation methods?

A second tension arises due to the origin of the black and white photo set (Australian situations, landscapes, people, and objects). Veronica felt compelled at times to make decisions regarding whether or not all the photos in the set should be used. When deciding to minimize the set, the decisions were based on the cultures in which the photo sets would be used and the content of the photographs, knowing that cultural notions of certain images differ. Because this set contained many people and settings but few people of colour and little variation in the type of scenery photos, Veronica decided to cut the photo set down to photos she believed the participants could relate – scenes that could be found anywhere and photos including only shadows of people so that skin colour would not be an issue. While the condensed photo set used in these situations elicited information from the participants, one is left with the questions:

- How would the choice of participant-generated photos have influenced the study?
- How did the researcher's choice of photos affect the study outcomes?

A third concern causing methodological decisions regarding the photo sets came with the content of the photographs and potential participant associations due to the content. For example, Veronica considered pulling problematic photos from the set. Her concern was with the relevance of such photos in light of the research topic and with the potential for the photographs to evoke personal memories placing the participants in difficult, emotional, and perhaps vulnerable states. She decided to keep the photo set complete. Interestingly, the participants chose all of the photos Veronica questioned (see [Figure 10](#) for a montage of these photographs). Although no negative situations arose, we have the following questions:

- Who decides which photographs should be used?
- Should ethics' review boards examine all elicitation tools?
- Are researchers limiting or promoting participant voices with decisions in photo sets?
- Are the benefits of photo-elicitation worth risking the chances for participant pain?

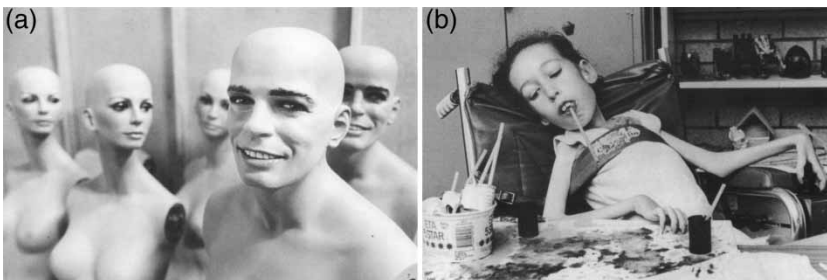


Figure 10. Decisions involved in decontextualized photo sets: what to leave in and what to take out. (a) Mannequin Factory 6, Sydney – 1974: © 1986 David Moore (www.davidmoorephotography.com.au), (b) Girl in Wheel Chair: © 1986 The Catholic Leader.

Meaning and photographs

We definitely see value in using visual data sources, in this case photo-elicitation, in social research. Through Veronica's experiences, we believe the photograph data assist researchers in understanding that which the researchers are familiar and that which they are unfamiliar. However, as put forth by past researchers, we wonder about the role of the photographs.

- Are the photographs merely a supplemental or supporting feature in which participants restate their understandings?
- Are the photographs extending meaning and understanding for the researcher so that she or he can better represent the participants?
- Do photographs convey inherent meaning or meaning in and of themselves?

Visual representation

Graphic portraits were the result of Veronica's methodological decisions of including portraiture and visual data collection methods. This last area of potentials and tensions comes in considering the participants and the readers. This area is problematic for the portraitist or any researcher using a mode of representation outside of the accepted formal, scholarly article. The following questions and more come into the fore of our minds:

- How do we best represent our participants and their thoughts, beliefs, and understandings?
- What is the purpose of this research and does this purpose assume a certain audience?
- Who is the audience?
- Who will actually read this text?
- Who will publish this text?

Photo-Elicitation Interviewing

Photos decontextualized?
Photo montage

Providing options,
Pondering logistics,
Positioning questions as the context.

Supplying a common visual, a referent,
Sharing through a vehicle,
Securing the tenor.

Building blocks of cognition (Rumelhart 1982),
Bridging meaning,
Bringing together the known and the new.

Reducing mis-understanding,
Reaping access, awareness, deeper
understanding,
Rendering realizations and empowerment.

Figure 11. Poetic depiction of possibilities in photo-elicitation.

Can we help but to ask: Is the purpose of presentation to publish or to affect change? In making our decisions in format and mode of representation, we believe we might always be reaching the scholarly audience. Although we change the format in hopes of reaching a broader audience, what might actually be happening is a narrowing of the scholarly audience to one that accepts the format we have chosen. What then are our options? Perhaps we are left with the choice to provide multiple, varying representations (e.g. Wolf 1992).

Conclusion

The benefits of photo-elicitation interviews using a decontextualized data-set became clear in these studies. As a result, research methodologists should include this option with researcher- and participant-generated photographs to explore its potential. Although the photographs are not bound by the particulars of the contextual situation, the process brought forth the possibility of the research question serving as the context. Of particular importance is the potential for researchers to empower participants through photo-elicitation processes, placing participants in the leading role (that of guiding the interview through photo choices and explanations) and placing them in a position of self-awareness (see Figure 11 for Veronica's poetic reflection of the possibilities in photo-elicitation).

Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge Lisa A. Rue, University of Northern Colorado, for her support and providing Veronica with the two evaluation experiences referenced in this manuscript. Without these experiences, the present information would not have been as broad in scope – in participants, research topics, contexts, or discoveries.

Note

1. A decontextualized photo set is a set of photographs chosen by the researcher that has no direct connection to the participants, the topic, or to the setting in which the research is conducted. According to Banks (2007), this form of photo-elicitation is the most uncommon form used in social research and the most problematic.

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Appendix

Photo set information

Black and white decontextualized photo set

Shop location and mailing address

375 Camberwell Road

Camberwell, Vic 3124

Australia

Tel/Fax (+613) 9813 2533

E-mail: books@peoplemaking.com.au

Description. Photolanguage is a means of communication designed to facilitate personal expression and interaction in small groups. The viewer is asked to become aware of the associations that spring up and the resonances that are awakened by the photograph. This enables the viewer to know him/herself better by trying to put this inner life into worlds and to communicate to the group. Photolanguage consists of 130 black and white photographs of all sorts of situations, landscapes, people, and objects. Some have portrait orientation and others landscape.