



Enhancing low-income South African students' narrative capability and the capability for epistemic contribution through photovoice

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13 September 2019



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID

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About the Miratho project

- Miratho is a longitudinal (2016-2020) mixed-methods project on achieved higher education learning outcomes for low-income youth.
- Team: Melanie Walker (UFS), Patience Mukwambo (UFS), Monica McLean (Nottingham), Ann-Marie Bathmaker (Birmingham), with Carmen Martinez-Vargas (UFS) and Thusanani Foundation (youth-led NGO).
- We are working with 64 students from rural and township areas in South Africa who are enrolled across five diverse universities.
- We focus on students from low income backgrounds because we think this throws into sharp relief who has wealth and power in our society and who has wealth and power in our higher education system.
- It also tells us which stories and whose version of the social and higher education world we listen to, and encourages us to ask why.
- A better understanding of low income students' struggles and achievements points to some of the things that need to change for universities to be more inclusive.

About this presentation

This presentation critically reflects on the value of the photovoice strand of the project, using a capabilities lens to understand this value. In my reflections, I draw from students' individual evaluations of the photovoice process, and our photovoice exhibition.

Aims:

To offer a comprehensive description of the photovoice approach followed in the project, in order to provide sufficient grounds for conclusions I make about its potential to enhance students' narrative capability and the capability for epistemic contribution.

To reflect on its usefulness in reaching policy makers and taking up underrepresented voices in the South African higher education context.

About photovoice

- **Theoretical underpinnings** (see Wang & Burris, 1997): a) education for critical consciousness (Freire, 1973); b) feminism and notions of ‘voice’ (e.g. Hooks, 1981); and c) participatory documentary photography (e.g. Hubbard, 1994).
- **Aims:** 1) cultivate critical consciousness among participants; 2) allow participants to document aspects of their lives on their own terms; and 3) reach policy makers with the project’s findings to enact change.
- **Process:** Participants are given cameras and asked to document various aspects of their lived experiences through photographs. Images are then used to elicit analytic discussions during focus groups or interviews; participants narrate the personal significance of the images. Projects typically conclude with an exhibition, where findings could/should reach policy makers (Latz, et al. 2016).
- **Value:** Asking participants to create visuals in addition to spoken responses to interview questions creates a layer of richness within the data not possible through words alone; photographs can generate visceral responses from consumers of the project’s findings - which is important for connecting with policy makers (Wang & Burris, 1997; Latz, et al. 2016).

Our photovoice process

The workshops:

- Day 1: About photovoice, River of Life drawings, camera training
- Day 2: Developing storyboards, taking photographs
- Day 3: Taking photographs, curating and captioning photo-stories
- Day 4: Collective data analysis and photovoice exhibition

Outcomes of the workshops:

- Nineteen photo-stories were produced and one common book. The individual photo-stories came out of three four-day workshops in Free State, Limpopo and Gauteng in which students received basic photography training, discussed the theme of exclusion and inclusion, and then produced storyboards on which they could base their photographs and narratives.
- We worked on the theme of students' stories on exclusion and inclusion at university (with effects for learning outcomes).
- They took their own photographs, presented these for feedback, followed by further photograph taking. On the final day of the workshop they curated and captioned each photo, including an overall title for the photo-story.

Written reflections on the photovoice process

- When I participated in the PV I learned...

“That our journey was the same or we faced the very same challenges as students no matter the university.

“The best way of succeeding through all the obstacles is by reaching out for help e.g. Trying to associate yourself with others”.

“Also I learned the importance of sharing your experiences with others coz you find something to relate to from their experiences too” - Busisiwe

Written reflections on the photovoice process

- When I participated in the PV I felt...

“...part of something big and life changing. Being able to share my life story with someone to help them have it better than I did. To be able to share my events in order to change how the education structure should work is extremely profound than I could ever express” - Dumisani

“Motivated by sharing my stories with different students from different varsity so I felt welcomed cause we share the common struggle I always thought maybe its us from Univen who’s struggle at varsity”-Tintswalo

“...belonging (inclusion). Connected and free to express my feelings. Inspired, motivated and encouraged to reach my goals. Responsible for my actions. Appreciative, hopeful, purposeful and grateful”. -Anathi

Understanding students' reflections through a capabilities lens

- Typically, photovoice projects are assessed according to the extent to which they empower participants (with effects for social change)
- Little to know evidence of social change in photovoice literature, suggesting photovoice is often promoted based on what researchers hope it will achieve
- Looking at photovoice through a capabilities lens is helpful because it encourages us to look for evidence of enhanced freedom or a widening of capability sets for participants.
- Reflections indicate the enhancement of: a) the freedom to tell one's story b) the freedom to be a giver and taker of valuable knowledge

Narrative capability

- As Watts (2008) argues, everyone has a story to tell but the different lives that inform and frame the stories we tell of ourselves are valued differently.
- The power to tell one's own story lies in two interrelated aspects of storytelling: the value of the story, and the way one tells it (Watts, 2008).
- However, the power to tell stories can be rendered meaningless, in the absence of 'narrative capability', or the real opportunities individuals have to tell their stories (Watts, 2008). That is, individuals may, have reserves of narrative capital (e.g. linguistic capital; see Yosso, 2005) but be unable to make use of it because they are not given effective opportunities to tell their stories, particularly if a necessary condition of this narrative capability is the freedom to be listened to (Watts, 2008).
- It is the participatory and inclusive nature of storytelling that makes stories particularly effective as a way of transmitting social knowledge, because the listener comes to participate in the construction of the story, and thus ends up having a stake in it. - > Through story telling, epistemic contributions are made; people add to and take from common pools of epistemic materials - materials used for enabling understanding, practical reason and deliberation.

Capability for epistemic contribution

- There are two kinds of epistemic giving that together delineate a capability that is plausibly fundamental to human flourishing, the giving of:
 - Informational materials - information itself, but also anything bearing on the question at hand, like evidence, hypotheses, argumentation etc. and
 - Interpretive materials – anything required to make sense of a more or less shared social world, like different interpretations, but also anything related to how interpretations are justified or how reasonable they are, such as the concepts, theories or lenses used to conceive of them (Fricker, 2015).
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- This capability is about having the internal ability for forming and sharing beliefs about the world, including the interpretation of one's social world, without having these ideas, thoughts, beliefs rejected on the grounds of testimonial or hermeneutical injustice.

Reflections

- Students gave to and took away from a common pool of knowledge about poverty and associated struggles and achievements in a higher education context.
- They were positioned as the experts on this because of their experiences and their understanding of the significance of these experiences in a South African higher education context.
- They were co-researchers creating knowledge and enhancing our understanding about the factors that influence access, participation and outcomes of university for low-income youth.
- They shared knowledge with each other and with us (made epistemic contributions) in the process of making and telling their stories (using their narrative capability).
- In the same way that parables and other genres of stories are used to convey a particular lesson or moral, stories about our lives convey or carry meaning or hidden messages from which we learn.
- Two capabilities were not the aim of the photovoice project, but looking through a capabilities lens illuminates them in ways that might not have been possible when using more traditional assessment criteria based on photovoice principles.
- To conclude: instead of promoting and evaluating photovoice projects on the basis of their aims, it is more fruitful to ask what freedoms have been enhanced for participants, and whether or not they have reason to value them.

End.

www.ufs.ac.za/miratho

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