

Foregrounding students' voices to inform good practice

Experiences of using photovoice as a visual
participatory research method



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The 'Good Teaching' project

- To explore students' conceptions of good teaching and effective learning at university
- Rationale
 - Practical - develop a network of staff researchers (Māori, Pacific, international and academic development)
 - Theoretical - foreground students' voices recognising their complexity & fluidity (Doherty & Singh, 2005; Madge et al 2009)
 - **Methodological** - focus group discussion (Keefe & Andrews, 2014), critical incident technique (Curtis, Townsend, & Airini, 2012; Flanagan, 1954), and 'photovoice' (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The 'Good Teaching' project team



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Recruitment

- Division of Humanities
- Recruitment through multiple pathways
- Successful students – B+ or above
- ‘Positive deviance’ approach
 - Challenge deficit discourses



Participants

- Total 33 students (17 undergraduates and 16 postgraduates)
- Four cohorts
 - 7 Māori, 6 Pacific, 11 International, 11 Local
- Students could participate in the group they were most comfortable with

Data collection

- 7 groups
 - Māori, International, Local - undergrad
 - Māori, International, Local – postgrad
 - Pacific (combined)
- 2 focus group sessions (one week apart)
- First focus group
 - critical incident technique
 - recall a teaching or learning incident that stood out in their minds for any reason
 - open-ended questions
 - set up photovoice task

Data collection

- Second focus group sessions (one week later)
- **‘photovoice’**
 - students discussed 4 photos they took to represent ‘effective learning’ & ‘good teaching’.
 - Students were encouraged to respond to and ask questions about each other’s photographs

Why photovoice?

- Recognized as a participatory social action research method (Wang et al., 1998)
 - Research *with* rather than *on* people
 - common goal of sharing pictures to create a dialogue.
- A picture is worth 1000 words
 - convey a story, emotions, ideas, and thoughts
- Even the choice to take a photo has meaning
 - participants determine the subject and the meaning of the photographs

Photovoice

- Origins in health care contexts
- A method to empower and give 'voice' to those who are otherwise marginalised.
- Also early childhood education, domestic violence, homelessness, indigenous research.....



Photovoice

- Photovoice little used in higher education.
- Barriers to learning in higher education (Steyn & Kamper, 2011)
- Pedagogical tool (Stroud, 2014)
- To our knowledge not to foreground student voice in the way we have used it in our project (diverse students, positive deviance).

Key questions

1. Critical incident, open-ended discussion or photovoice.

Which data collection approach did the participants prefer and why?

2. How were the insights offered by each approach different/complementary?

1. What did students prefer?

- Good engagement with photovoice
 - 31 students came with photographs to the 2nd focus group session
 - Remaining 2 students forwarded their photographs with written explanations
 - Students described the photovoice task as “hard”, “challenging”, “fun”, “easy”, “creative” and “active”

“Having to go and do it ourselves was so active and it made us think within ourselves and have the experience of all week noticing things and thinking about things all the time” (LFGP 2)

“I was kind of looking for things, yeah, I think I probably took notice more...noticing what the lecturers did” (MFGU 2)

What did the participants prefer?

- No clear preference for a particular data collection approach but..
- Repeat focus group sessions allowed time for them to 'notice' things in the interim
- Prompted the participants to reflect on and notice teaching and learning

I was trying to find things that were a bit varied and things that actually made me just learn better than the usual just following notes. So I just kind of went about my week really and just if I was in a situation where I felt like I was really getting something from it, I took a photo - MFGU 2

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- Photovoice task initially seemed daunting but the creative aspect allowed them to access and express ideas

“I really liked being tasked with this because it is a creative and sort of metaphorical journey and I’ve found, predominantly just the scientific feel of the university, it’s not the greatest place for me and so it was nice to discover that there’s creativity out there in it”

-LFGP 2

2. How was photovoice different/similar?

- Compared with critical incident and open-ended interview – qualitatively different
 1. Photographs drew on symbolism, metaphor and simile
 2. More affectively laden
 3. Greater focus on effective learning

1. Symbolism, metaphor, simile e.g. team-work



It's not a lonely process ... I need to learn and he needs to teach or she needs to teach. It's like teamwork ... It can be a partnership and I think from a learner's point of view, for me, it is much more meaningful when it happens that way...some things are really difficult, are not easy to teach and [you] need to be able [to] put yourself into someone else's shoes sometimes and even to have the same perspective the student has ...

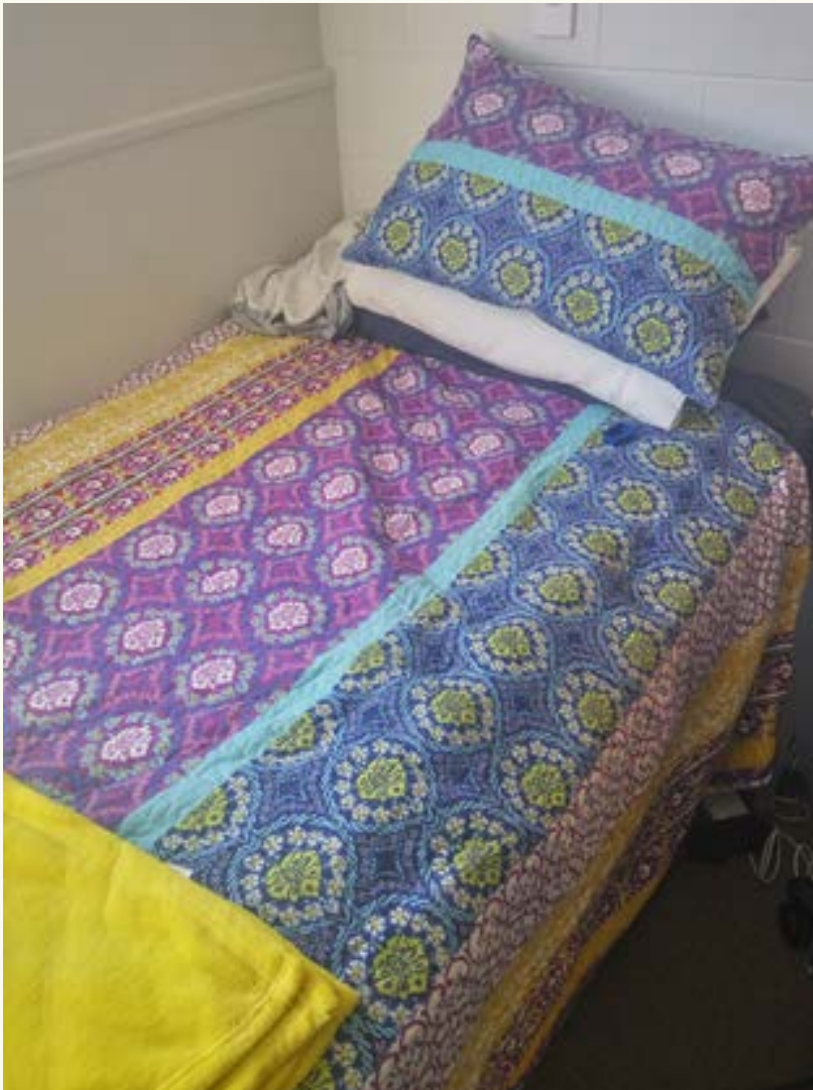
2. Photographs affectively laden



So these little succulents are actually quite vulnerable and quite fragile and it's very easy to trample on them as it is very easy to trample on ... us as students by being authoritarian or ... kind of judging [our] ideas and things ... with a little bit of care and some nutrients, then these things will proliferate. The strong, solid tree trunks in the middle are there to support and to kind of to protect really, to create a kind of ... safe space to be in ... All the succulents look similar but some are ... tiny, little kind of things that are just starting to grow and others are kind of quite established size. So it's kind of like people at different stages. (LFGP 2)

3. Greater focus on effective learning strategies

- All four cohorts identified specific actions they adopted to meet their own cognitive, physical and psychological needs.
- These included:
 - revising content and finding note taking approaches that worked for them;
 - using university resources;
 - being organised and prepared;
 - practising for assessment using mock exam conditions; and
 - trying out different learning approaches



- *This is my bed. I've recently started changing out my schedule. I was going to bed between midnight and two, waking up seven, eight-ish, every night. But I've changed my schedule. I am in bed by 10. I read for half an hour and it's like the highlight of my day. I look forward to it and then I'm up anywhere between 5.30 and 7.30 in the morning depending on, and I exercise in the morning. I used to have to take like two hour naps during the day just to stay awake.
– PFG 2*

Student voice – students as research partners

- Photovoice – participants involved in early stages of analysis - chose what photographs to share and the meaning behind the photographs
- Articulate ideas not accessible through talk-only methods e.g. affective responses to particular teaching and learning situations
- Explore each other's ideas in the resulting discussion
- Highlighted the importance of 'feeding back' the outcomes of the project.

Students as partners in curriculum development?

- Māori undergraduate focus group students suggested that aspects of the study could provide a model for eliciting course-related feedback.

“I think also this ... small kind of focus group, ... I can see it having a role in just any paper, say ... halfway through the semester ... I think the problem with mass reviews, I just feel like my voice is going to get lost amongst everyone else who’s there... a real benefit in offering my thoughts through that forum (MFGU 1)

Thanks to

- the Good Teaching Project participants
- Ako Aotearoa, our funding provider



Student suggestions for future work

- Include students from other academic divisions.
- Purposefully recruit students representing a wider spectrum of diversity e.g. LGBTQIA, distance or disabled students
- Māori PG focus group suggested providing opportunities for different forms of data e.g. texts

Impact

- Development of a student advisory panel
- Pacific student focus group continue to meet regularly and have become a source of mentoring support.
- End of project celebration Hui (attended by 2/3 of the project participants).
- Redevelopment of the My Otago First Year (MOFY) website
- Findings disseminated at a 'workshop for new teachers'
- Further workshops being developed (for both teaching staff and students)
- Informed the University's tutor training programme