

Applications of Photovoice: From Community Planning Initiatives to Water Literacy Studies

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Introduction: What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a research methodology aimed at documenting the lived experiences of participants through the art of photography. Participants are provided with cameras and guided through a series of workshops that teach basic photography skills, lead critical conversations, and end with a public display of photographs with artist statements. The goals of photovoice are threefold [1] (p. 369):

1. To enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns,
2. To promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and
3. To reach policymakers.

Photovoice has been used by researchers to understand community dynamics and issues and create political momentum for change [1,2]. It has also been used within education settings to enhance environmental education processes, convey youth narratives, and strengthen youth connections to their own communities [3,4]. This poster provides a 3-part introduction to photovoice: first, I discuss the role of photovoice within **community planning initiatives** in Denver; then, I briefly investigate literature on how photovoice has been used with **water management processes**; finally, I conclude with a proposal to combine such initiatives within a **water literacy** project designed to encourage community engagement and water-wise behaviors among college students. Feedback and/or suggestions about the project proposal are welcome.

Photovoice and Community Planning

The Center for Community Engagement to Advance Scholarship and Learning (CCESL) works to advance community-engaged scholarship and teaching within the University of Denver. They have crafted numerous [photovoice projects](#) to engage community voices in local planning initiatives, including seeking youth input regarding neighborhood construction and change, and engaging Denver residents about the most dangerous traffic corridor in the city. CCESL as a unique partnership with the City and County of Denver (CCD), which allows them to involve policymakers within photovoice projects well before the final exhibit. The most recent collaboration was the [West Area Plan Photovoice Project](#), where the CCD, sought community input on a Neighborhood Planning Initiative (NPI). A diverse group of 10 West Denver residents took photographs regarding the following prompts:

- *What should the city invest in for your neighborhood?*
- *What is unique about your neighborhood?*

Invest Example: So Close by Nikita



In this picture, trash is strewn about next to a trash bin. The trash almost made it into the bin, but close enough just isn't good enough. People in the community only need to put in a little effort to help Villa Park be a cleaner, and more welcoming place. If everyone picked up a piece of trash once in a while and had public trash receptacles placed around the neighborhood to throw it into, we could minimize litter in our outdoor spaces.

Unique Example : Blessed to be Here by Alan



Valverde has different parks that have a privileged view of the City of Denver, but they do not have the necessary conditions to appreciate it. Observing this landscape makes you proud to belong to this community, to this city, state and country and I want to preserve and care for it.

Photovoice and Water Management

Rather than focusing solely on technological solutions within water management, Photovoice encourages community engagement in processes like watershed protection and water conservation [3,5]. Indeed, photovoice is a natural tool within for such processes because understanding and using water is naturally a very visual experience. One scholar emphasizes that seeing is critical to how one knows and creates meanings about water [2]. His literature review of photovoice research within the water field highlights the numerous opportunities of this methodology:

A) water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

A project in South Africa revealed community concerns about poor construction and compromised privacy of pit latrines:



"Here is ours... the bottom planks are getting loose... you can see the hole from here, inside everything is exposed." [6] (p. 169)

B) public participation in water management

A project in Australia highlights Aboriginal interests, values, and traditional resource management processes:



"I'm collecting long-neck turtle from that billabong at Lizzie Downs." [7] (p. 99)

C) Perceptions surrounding land and water

A project in Japan reveals the importance of short-distance elements in youth perspective:



"We often catch fish at a spot like this. Dozens of fish come upstream here, so we can catch a lot." [8] (p. 14)

D) Domestic urban water management

An Australian project describes the efforts of participants towards water conservation:



"People expect to use a lot of water (for showers, dish washing, and for flushing the toilet)." [5] (p. 149)

Project Proposal: Water Literacy of College Students

Water literacy refers to the application of one's water-related knowledge and attitudes to create sustainable water behaviors. It is shaped by formal school learning, as well as experiential, place-based and associative learning processes that occur throughout own's life.



Water Features on DU Campus (Right: Evans Memorial Church [9]; Left: Lily pads in Harpers Humanities Garden [10])

The University of Denver attracts much of their student population not just from other states but other countries as well. This means that throughout the student body, there are many varied experiences with water resources, emerging from many different climates and water management systems. College students moving off campus are just starting to pay their own water bill for the first time, shaping awareness of their own physical water use. However, they are likely associating their water use and perceptions with their childhood experiences of water, and that could be vastly different than what is expected or needed within Denver's hydrosocial climate. Thus, understanding the water literacy of college students is a critical component to encouraging responsible, educated, and water-wise responses from the up-and-coming group of decisionmakers.

With that in mind, the goals of this proposed project are three-fold:

1. Encourage critical conversations about water resources among college students, which can lead to more reflective and water-wise behaviors.
2. Provide feedback and direction to educational programs that teach topics of water literacy.
3. Educate water managers about their newest group of decisionmakers, how they shape their opinions and concerns about water, and how they can best communicate with them.

In order to accomplish this, out-of-state and/or international students who are paying their own water bill will be recruited to partake in a photovoice project centered around water literacy. The suggested prompts are:

- *How do you experience or view water in Colorado, as compared to your home state/country?*
- *What concerns or worries do you have regarding water resources?*

Critical conversations that emerge from these prompts will reveal differences in water literacy among students while providing useful information to teachers and water managers alike. Feedback about any part of this project is welcome.

Contact

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