Visual Inquiry in Educational Research

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Abstract

In visual culture, people would like to perceive, express, and negotiate the meanings of social world visually so that the status of the visual has reached that of written word and narrative. Therefore, social researchers are motivated to develop visual methodologies to examine the visual dimension of social worlds. According to them, the visual methodologies could generate richer information for us to understand social phenomena than the traditional quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Therefore, there is a burgeoning uptake of visual research methods in different fields of social sciences. Considering the ubiquity and importance of the visual in the world for education, the Beijing International Review of Education has organized this special issue to discuss some of the theoretical and methodological issues of visual research methods in educational research.

Keywords

visual methodology – visual culture – research method – photovoice – education research

It is a pleasure serve as the guest editors of this special issue on “Visual Inquiry in Educational Research,” of *Beijing International Review of Education*. We have been supported by Editors-in-chief, Professor Zhu Xudong, Professor Michael A. Peters and Associate Professor Zhang Huajun.

The use of visual materials such as photographs, pictures and videos in social research is not new and is not only an important part just gathering data or

evidence, but also forms visual research methodologies to explore research questions in their own right. In anthropology and sociology, for example, it has been common for scholars to use photographs for the analysis and representation of social and cultural phenomena since the 1960s (Harper, 2012). Nevertheless, visual research methods were ignored by many scholars in education and in other disciplines until the rise of visual cultures in the light of technological changes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Emmison, 2016; Holliday, 2000; Marvasti, 2004). In visual cultures, people produce, reproduce, diffuse and consume visual images – a process that has now become part of everyday life (Burri, 2012). As Rose (2001, p. 6) notes:

we are, of course, surrounded by different sorts of visual technologies – photography, film, video, digital graphics, television, acrylics, for example – and the images they show us – TV programmes, advertisements, snapshots, public sculpture, movies, surveillance video footage, newspaper pictures, paintings. All these different sorts of technologies and images offer views of the world; they render the world in visual terms... They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways.

In visual culture, accordingly, the status of the visual has now reached that of the written word and narrative (Marvasti, 2004). For instance, many people nowadays prefer to perceive and represent their social worlds on the Internet and social media networking sites using multiple visual images and emojis instead of or as well as words. In this sense, social worlds are visually constructed (Sztompka, 2008).

Although social researchers have examined the visual dimension of social worlds, they are also aware of the lack of sophisticated methods to investigate the visual (Kunter & Bell, 2006; Moore et al., 2008). The methodological gap motivates them to develop visual research methods, such as photo/film-elicitation, auto-photography, photo-survey, photovoice, video diaries, video-based observation, body mapping, and web mapping (Asaba et al., 2014; Knoblauch et al., 2013; Lapenta, 2011; Lombard, 2013; Moore et al., 2008; Vandeviver, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997). According to researchers (e.g., Rose, 2014), visual research methods can generate meaningful data that other conventional research methods cannot. Many visual research methods like photo/film-elicitation and photovoice involve discussions between researchers and research participants about visual images. The discussions generate richer information because the visual images “help groups to focus attention, to surface areas of agreement and disagreement, to make implicit knowledge and past experience explicit, to discover new perspectives, and to document or revise decisions” (Eppler, 2007, p. 585) and “evoke elements of human consciousness

that words alone cannot; images evoke both more information and different kinds of information" (Asaba et al., 2014, p. 155). Therefore, they argue that visual research methods not only allow social researchers to study visual images and visualise social lives, but also to investigate how people see and perceive social worlds and how their seeing and perception construct and are constructed by visual images in order to "reveal what is hidden in the inner mechanism of the ordinary and the taken for granted" (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004, p. 7; also see Emmison, 2016, and Rose, 2014). Perhaps more importantly, what becomes possible is that visual methodologies can avoid the limitations and even some of the well-known issues of objectivity and biases that can occur in establishing research programmes and in particular the issue of what and how researchers interpret what they see. Moreover, reflecting the emphasis in contemporary theorizing from a social constructionism perspective, that knowledge is socio-culturally and linguistically constructed rather than created, so that meaning is shared, we need to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher, and how they are enmeshed in the whole research milieu. Following from the groundbreaking work of Berger and Luckmann (1991) who view society as existing both as objective and subjective reality, it seems that visual methodologies can offer ways that far more easily decenter the researcher, shifting away from the common and taken-for-granted researcher/researched binary, the issues of researcher objectivity and interpretations.

Despite the development of visual research methods in different fields of the social sciences, there are still many methodological concerns about visual research methods among social researchers. First, there is a debate about the purpose of visual images in visual research. As Harper (1988) and Manny (2016) observe, researchers who are influenced by post-positivism or naturalism suggest that visual research methods should be used to collect a variety of data to investigate the production, uses, and interpretations of visual images in a society; narrative or phenomenological researchers propose that visual research methods are a process to produce visual images for the illustration and representation of the realities being studied; and critical theorists argue that visual research methods are approaches to empower participants to speak out in order to emancipate themselves from social control. Second, there is a concern about who should produce the visual data in the visual research process. Some researchers prefer to produce visual data by themselves. For example, in photo-elicitation research, researchers will take photographs and then ask participants to interpret the photographs during interviews (Lapenta, 2011). Other researchers, such as those who conduct auto-photography (Knoblauch et al., 2013) and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), suggest that visual research should invite participants to take photographs of themselves or their community and

then invite the participants to discuss the meanings of their social lives based on the photographs they take. Moreover, there is a concern about whether visual images are a kind of data for the analysis of the phenomena being studied or a visual aid to facilitate the processes of interviews or focus groups (Harper, 2012). This concern raises another methodological issue about how visual data should be analysed if they are just a visual aid (Oliffe, et al., 2008).

To address and respond to these methodological concerns, academic publications on visual research methods have been published, including books, handbooks, sourcebooks and journals. Examples include *Visual Methodologies* (Rose, 2001), *Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People* (Thomson, 2008), *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination* (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004), *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods: Application, Reflection and Ethics* (Manny, 2016), *Seeing is Believing? Approaches to Visual Research* (Pole, 2004) and *Doing Visual Research* (Mitchell, 2011); handbooks and sourcebooks like *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011) and *Image-based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers* (Prosser, 1998); and journals like *Visual Studies*, *Visual Anthropology*, *Visual Methodologies* and *the Journal of Visual Culture*.

Accordingly, there is a burgeoning uptake of visual research methods in many fields of the social sciences, yet still very little in educational research. As Moss and Pini (2016, p. 1) note “there is an absence of theoretically grounded discussion of the possibilities and challenges of the approach for educational researchers.” This does not mean that visual research methods are less important in the field of education. According to Goldfarb (2002), education as a social institution is profoundly influenced by visual culture, so education researchers need to examine the relationship between the visual and education and to explore visual pedagogy strategies for modern societies. Even though visual research methods to some extent can facilitate education researchers in achieving their goals, it seems that education researchers have been less interested in applying these methods in their research or discussing the opportunities and challenges of visual research methods in education (Moss & Pini, 2016).

In a world where the visual is and no longer limited to the static image, but where internet and technological advances now mean that digital video technologies have become such a ubiquitous part of life and of education, it was this lack of engagement with the visual in educational research that saw Michael A. Peters’ efforts to set up a research journal based of video, rather than print medium. From 2013, he discussed this with several major international publishers and by 2016 as Editor-in Chief he established the first video research

journal in the social sciences, the *Video Journal of Education and Pedagogy* (VJEP) initially published by Springer until 2018, and from 2019 by Brill. In 2015, a new learned society, the Association for Visual Pedagogies (AVP) was established to not only support the new *Video Journal of Education and Pedagogy*, but also to promote and advance the emerging field of visual pedagogies, an exciting, pioneering development which is creating a multi-disciplinary global community with shared interests in visual pedagogies (see <https://visualpedagogies.com/>, and <https://brill.com/view/journals/vjep/vjep-overview.xml>).

Considering the ubiquity and importance of the visual in the world of so many of our youth and for education, the *Beijing International Review of Education* has organized this special issue, “Visual Inquiry in Educational Research,” to provide a platform to discuss some of the theoretical and methodological issues and contributions of visual research methods to educational research. The issue contains eight papers by experienced and emerging scholars from Germany, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, and China.

In the opening paper, *Photography as a Research Method with Learners in Compulsory Education: A Research Review*, Helen Hanna offers a systematic review of research articles from 2003–2019 on the use of photography as a research method with learners in compulsory education. According to her review, there are two themes in the literature, i.e., the roles of photographic methods in education research and the ways in which photographs are used in education research. She also reflects on what may be holding back the expansion of visual research methods and offers a proposal for encouraging its use in education.

The second paper is by Patricia A. L. Ong, *Visual Research Methods: Qualifying and Quantifying the Visual*. Ong discusses the methodological, theoretical and conceptual issues regarding the interpretation of visual data in curriculum studies. By using a visual ethnographic study of the early childhood setting, Ong shows how different types of visual data can be interpreted and analysed in order to visualise the visual culture and hidden curriculum in a learning environment.

Boris Zizek and Hendrik-Zoltán Andermann introduce the image-analytical methods of objective hermeneutics based on an exemplary analysis of a youth-oriented website in the third paper, entitled *Analysis of Youth-Oriented Websites – An Introduction to the Qualitative Image-Analytical Methods of Objective Hermeneutics*. They show how difficult and complex analysing the meaning structures of images and pictorial design on a website can be. To handle this difficulty and complexity, from the perspective of objective hermeneutics, they suggest that researchers should apply sequential analysis in their studies, which can enable them to work out the inner structure and latent meaning of images and pictorial designs.

Compared with other visual research methods, photovoice is an especially popular visual research method in the field of education (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017). Papers using photovoice are particularly pertinent for this special issue, because it was developed in 1992 in China by Caroline Wang, University of Michigan, and Mary Ann Burris, Program Officer for Women's Health, Ford Foundation, Beijing, China to "empower the silenced rural women in Yunnan Province, China to influence the policies and programs affecting them" (Wang & Burris, 1994; see also <https://participedia.net/method/5016>). Photovoice as a qualitative tool documents social reality through subject participation to promote empowerment, perspective and involvement. It builds on feminist theory, and Freirean concepts in particular empowerment and critical consciousness, and used documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1994; 1997; Kuratani & Lai, 2001).

Therefore, four papers in this special issue are concerned with this method. In his paper, *Photovoice as a Tool for Critical Reflection in Communities of Practice for Teachers' Professional Identity Development*, Hing Kwan To criticises conventional written reflective tools such as diaries, reflective papers and log-books, which aim to facilitate novice teachers in making critical reflections on their professional lives and developing a positive professional identity. He proposes that the photovoice method can be an innovative tool to overcome the limitations of other tools. According to his analysis, photovoice is a form of community of practice in which novice teachers can mutually interact and share ideas with one another in order to encourage them to reflect on and develop their professional identities. The paper systemically discusses how photovoice can be used by teacher–educators to achieve their goals.

To some extent, Pei Miao, Jin Wei, and Cai Chang's paper, *Exploring Prospective Teachers' Perception of Rural Teaching and Education through the Mediation of Photovoice*, echoes To's paper. Pei et al. show how photovoice can be used to help preservice teachers to become aware of, identify and revise their biased perceptions of the rural students and schools that they may serve. Based on a photovoice research project that examines five prospective teachers' perceptions of rural students and schools during a five-day field study, Pei et al. find that photovoice may facilitate the prospective teachers in changing their negative perceptions of rural students and schools to positive perceptions. At the end of the paper, they discuss the implication of photovoice for teacher preparation programmes.

In *Using Photovoice as Methodology, Pedagogy and Assessment Tool in Education: Graduate Students' Experiences and Reflections*, Wang Ting discusses how photovoice can be used as a research methodology, pedagogy and assessment tool in education through the investigation of a group of sixty Chinese graduate students who studied in an Australian Transnational Master of Education

programme and participated in a photovoice project. According to the findings, photovoice can provide opportunities for students to deepen their understanding and enhance their critical consciousness. Thus, she suggests photovoice as a participatory research methodology that has pedagogical, educational, and cultural appropriateness for Chinese students.

In the final contribution, *Photovoice Data Analysis: Critical Approach, Phenomenological Approach, and Beyond*, Kwok Kuen Tsang critically reviews the two existing approaches, i.e., critical and phenomenological approaches, to photovoice data analysis. After showing the limitations of the two approaches, especially their data analysis strategies, Tsang proposes a data analysis strategy for photovoice in order to overcome the limitations of the critical and phenomenological approaches. By using a photovoice study of Hong Kong students' learning experiences as an example, they illustrate a four-stage approach of data analysis step-by-step, including (1) photograph analysis based on the researcher's interpretations, (2) photograph analysis based on participants' interpretations, (3) cross-comparison, and (4) theorisation. According to him, the approach can help researchers analyse both visual data and narrative data based on their interpretations and those of the participants.

In addition, readers of this special issue may also find two short articles that discuss "Double World-Class" universities and compulsory education policies in China in the section of China Watch, edited by Professor Jun Li. Finally, we wish to thank all who have contributed to this issue, the authors, as well as the reviewers.

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