This chapter discusses participatory visual methods as a framework for adult education.

Situating Participatory Visual Methods in Adult Education

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In this chapter, I discuss participatory visual methods in relation to the discourse on adult education and explore the ways in which they can contribute to adult learning. For the purpose of this discussion, I define participatory visual methods as a methodological approach that engages people in representing their experiences, perspectives, or cultures through the use of visual media, such as photographs, videos, paintings, murals, or mixed methods. Although visual is generally associated with imagery and assumed to be two-dimensional, it may also be three-dimensional. For example, objects that we touch and use on a daily basis, such as fabric, may be innovatively integrated into participatory visual methods, as discussed by Butterwick (Chapter 7) in this volume.

Although the types of visual media that can be used in participatory ways are seemingly unlimited, my discussion in this chapter gives weight to photography and video, not simply because my experience has centered on those media, but more importantly because photographic representations have been the most prevailing form of visual material used in the social sciences (Pauwels, 2010). The underlying concepts embedded in my discussion, however, may be applied to other forms of visual media. The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to the development of participatory visual methods as teaching practice for adult education. I begin by discussing participatory visual methods within a framework of visual methods and offer their potential implications in adult education. I go on to examine some of the participatory visual methods in relation to the discourse on adult education. This is followed by my analysis of adult learners’ experiences with the methods. Finally, a direction for future studies is suggested to capitalize on participatory visual methods for adult learning.

A Framework of Participatory Visual Methods

Defining the nexus between participatory visual methods and adult education is not an easy task, in part because visual methods, let alone participatory...
visual methods, are still undertheorized. The fact that the visual remains secondary to written texts across the social sciences (Harper, 2005) may have contributed to the undertheorization. A lack of concerted efforts among scholars using visual methods is likely to be another reason. Pointing to the tendency of reinventing the wheel in the domain of visual methods, Pauwels (2010) contended:

[T]here is little integration with respect to the findings and practices of visual methods, especially between the social sciences and the humanities and behavioral sciences. Visual methods, therefore, seem to be reinvented over and over again without gaining much methodological depth and often without consideration of long existing classics in the field. (p. 546)

My experience suggests that the predominant academic atmosphere, in which theories are prioritized over methods, may also contribute to the slow development of visual methods. Although scholars need to have certain expertise on the visual media they use, that expertise is unlikely to be recognized as an academic merit unless it is proven to be useful to developing theories. Hence, those who want to use visual methods need to develop their expertise on the methods on their own while simultaneously justifying their methodological approaches by rigorously engaging in theories. In reality, visual methods themselves warrant a theoretical framework. Developing a solid framework, thus, can be helpful to developing visual methods in adult education contexts. For this reason, I welcome Pauwels’s (2010) framework of visual methods. In what follows, I discuss participatory visual methods based on his framework and offer an insight into their potential implications in adult education. My discussion centers on the origin of visual material, analytical foci, and presentational formats.

The Origin of Visual Material. Visual methods can be classified by the origin of visual material, which can be pre-existing material (such as archival photographs), researcher-created visual material (such as a film recorded by an anthropologist), or respondent- or participant-generated material. Participatory visual methods are concerned with material created by participants. As Pauwels underscored, although such material is produced within certain parameters set up by a researcher, it can, however, allow participants to have greater control over their representations than researcher-created material. Allowing participants to create data about themselves is groundbreaking from a conventional perspective on research, in which data generation is considered a researcher’s job. Researchers using participatory methods engage in the process of data generation differently from the ways in which researchers using more conventional methods do. To work with participants in this process, researchers may need to offer instructions to them; concomitantly, the participants enter into a learning process. I believe this give-and-take interdependent relationship can generate room for education. In research, of course, the participant-generated material is not the end of it. “Researchers still need to
analyze and make sense of the visual output generated by the respondents; their cultural self-portrayal or vision needs to be verbally or visually framed within the research output” (Pauwels, 2010, p. 553). Although it is possible or even highly recommended to invite participants to the process of analysis, how to make sense of participant-generated visual material is ultimately a researcher's responsibility.

With this backdrop, I stop to pose questions about how these conceptual ideas about participatory visual methods can be applied to the practice of adult education and how significant this application might be. Simply put, what type of learning would adults be involved in when they come to represent their own images and experiences visually? What would adult educators gain from the practice of participatory visual methods? Would learner-generated visual material allow the educators to obtain information on the learners that remains otherwise obscure? I believe that these questions are worth exploring and can make a salient contribution to adult education.

**Analytical Foci.** As the foci of analysis, Pauwels pointed to production (the process of creating), the visual product itself, verbal feedback (verbal reactions to visual artifacts), and consumption (the use of visual artifacts). The first three areas are aligned with the analytical framework for visual methods discussed by Rose (2007). In her approach, an image is analyzed in three sites: site of production (the context in which an image is produced), site of image (image itself), and site of audiencing (the meanings of the image created by an audience). An underlying assumption is that visual representations can be understood by examining the three sites individually and in relationship with one another. Rose's framework can be useful, in particular, to analyzing participant-generated visual material, as it allows a researcher to examine the material from multiple angles, such as looking at what participants depicted (site of image), examining how the image has been depicted (site of production), inquiring into why it is depicted in the way it is depicted by the participants (site of audiencing), and reflecting on their relationships, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences embedded in the material created by them.

When the two frameworks are compared, Pauwels’s notion of consumption stands out, as it is not clearly defined in Rose’s framework. This may be because Rose’s framework focuses on images created in a research site. Because participatory visual methods underpin creation and self-representation, analysis of consumption may not be readily compatible with the methods. Consumption, however, has a strong tie with the field of education. Critical media literacy, for instance, is primarily concerned with critical analysis of visual representations portrayed in media (Brookfield, 1986; Kellner & Share, 2007). Finding a way to bridge this established tradition with the idea of participatory visual methods, as implied in Clover’s discussion on adult education at museums in this volume (Chapter 8), may open new possibilities to explore methods for adult education. The pedagogical possibility of participatory visual methods seems limited only by educators’ imaginations. Thinking about
each of the analytical foci distinctively and in relationship may help find ways to incorporate participatory visual methods for teaching adults.

**Presentational Formats.** The presentational format of visual products is an area for adult educators to consider in using participatory visual methods. In education settings, I find it useful to compile learner-generated visual products in a tangible format (for instance, a DVD or booklet) that can be owned by individual learners. A tangible compilation is useful to facilitating dialogue between the producers (learners) and their audience and also to enhancing the learners’ sense of accomplishment. Exhibitions in a physical or online space can also be thought of as presentational formats. Exhibitions can not only draw a wider audience but also open a way to communicate with funders, adult program developers, and other policy makers.

**Participatory Visual Methods and the Discourse on Adult Learning**

Thus far, I have discussed participatory visual methods within Pauwels’s framework of visual methods and offered some of the potential implications of participatory visual methods in adult education. Grounded in this theoretical overview, I go on to examine some of the participatory visual methods in relation to the discourse on adult education.

Photovoice may be the most widely adopted participatory visual method (see Mayfield-Johnson and Butler [Chapter 5] in this volume). It began as a research method in which participants take photographs to document their daily lives for group discussion in order to seek solutions to their common problems (Wang & Burris, 1997). Since its inception, photovoice has drawn attention from a wide range of studies (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). It has been promoted, in particular, in the field of childhood studies as an effective tool to enable children, especially those disenfranchised, to give voice to their experiences (for example, Aldridge, 2012; Luttrell, 2010). The recognition of participatory video, which refers to the process of participant-led video making, is also on the rise for similar reasons. The underlying assumption of these child-led visual methods is that they can allow children to talk about their experiences more comfortably than conventional methods, such as interviews or surveys, and to bring to light their experiences in the way only they can, with minimal interference from adults (Thomson, 2008). In addition to childhood studies, as exemplified in the growing popularity of digital storytelling or New Literacies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011), the principle of participatory visual methods has been promoted for engaging children in and out of schools.

In stark contrast, participatory visual methods have been discussed significantly less in the discourse on adult education. They have not taken center stage in this field either as a research approach or as a teaching practice. This is odd, considering the genesis of participatory research. This term was initially used to name a new research trend on adult education that emphasized engaging adults in inquiring into their learning (Swantz, 2008). To engage learners’
participation in research, researchers have explored less conventional research methods than pen-and-paper based practice (Hall, 1984). The literature on adult education, too, suggests that attention was paid to the idea of participatory visual methods for adult learning, as shown by Freire (1971), who used sketches to raise learners’ critical consciousness on the concept of labor.

Although participatory visual methods have not surfaced as a distinct domain in adult education, the literature does suggest that there is no lack of interest in the potential of participatory visual methods for adult learning. Furthermore, as implied in Barndt and Erickson (Chapter 2) in this volume, some of the projects conducted based on the idea of participatory visual methods were labeled differently from adult education (for instance, popular education or community activism), even when their implications for adult learning were significant. Thus, I believe that the lack of discussion on participatory visual methods in the literature on adult education does not indicate a lack of endeavors to use the methods for adult learning as much as a lack of analysis of them from the perspective of adult learning. Bringing together dispersed relevant practices and examining their implications for adult learning can lay the groundwork for defining the nexus between participatory visual methods and adult education and the synergistic development thereof.

**Adult Learners’ Experiences with Participatory Visual Methods**

An ultimate question to ask in developing participatory visual methods for adult education can be: What can adults learn or gain from these methods? To address this question, I offer some of my insights into adults’ experiences with participatory visual methods, drawing on my experience of teaching adults. The courses I taught were community-based and provided to socioeconomically marginalized adults to give voice to their experiences through participatory video and photography.

Before proceeding to my discussion, for clarity, I compare the phrases *participatory photography* and *photovoice* in the way I understand them. Although they are very often used synonymously, I think that there is a nuanced difference between the two. Photovoice has a strong connotation as a community-based research tool, as it was conceptualized as such at the outset. In contrast, participatory photography generally refers to “photographic documentation of one’s own life or surroundings” (Yang, 2014, p. 233) and accentuates photography by participants, as opposed to researchers, professional photographers, or other observers. Participatory photography sounds more flexible than photovoice and thus can be more easily applied to a variety of educational settings. Because adults may not necessarily research an issue together in a learning environment, I prefer to use the phrase participatory photography in the context of adult learning. Hereinafter, thus, I refer to my approach as participatory photography.

In what follows, I discuss my analysis of learners’ experiences with participatory visual methods in the studies I conducted. Three interrelated themes
stood out from the analysis. They are reflexive analysis, agency, and authoritative control of self-image. Because I offered lengthy discussions related to the first two themes elsewhere (Yang, 2014, 2015), I only summarize them here and focus my discussion on the third.

First, participatory visual methods can be effective in engaging learners in a reflexive process to analyze their own experiences (Yang, 2015). This is based on a participatory video project in which a group of adult learners as a research team explored ways to help other adult learners overcome barriers to pursue their education. They used video cameras to interview learners who had withdrawn from their education programs, and then reviewed and discussed the video footage together. This approach not only allowed the project participants to examine adult learners’ experiences, but also led them to a reflexive process in the sense that they looked at their own experiences anew, within a larger social context, and used this insight to interpret the video footage. As a result, they had critical dialogue among themselves on the issue they were exploring together and brought about a solution to the issue.

Second, participatory visual methods are useful to developing learners’ sense of agency (Yang, 2014). This is drawn from interviews conducted with individual learners who had participated in a participatory photography course in which they expressed important aspects of their lives through photography. The interviews were marked with the idea of agency to the extent that the learners showed strong intentionality by orienting their actions “cognitively and emotionally pointed toward some purpose” (Ortner, 2006, p. 134). I argue that participation in the entire production process—from conceptualizing ideas through taking photographs to sharing them with other people—drove the development of the learners’ sense of agency.

Third, participatory visual methods allow learners to create new self-images by taking control of their own representations. This argument is based on a course in which a group of adults created individual photoessays (short essays accompanied by relevant learner-generated photographs) on immigration. A female learner, Kristine (a pseudonym), who had taken the course with her spouse, talked about her experience in the course as:

I didn’t know really where he was coming from. I learned … more about him with small details of his story and the way he expressed that. I didn’t really expect it to happen because I had felt, OK, I am familiar with the story, and familiar with the particular photo of a man with a red backpack. That one [however] really stood up when he was describing it in the class … I think I saw more his story through his eyes. I got to know more about his story, which is interesting, which then in return I actually learned more from him about how to approach my work, which I didn’t expect.

At the time of taking the course, Kristine’s spouse was preparing to go back to his country of origin to sort out his immigration documents. Going through this process together was the topic of Kristine’s photoessay. Born and
raised in the United States, she had not thought about immigration seriously until she gave birth to her child. She thought that she had learned much about the complexity of immigration since then. Through this course, however, she realized that she had not known enough about her spouse's experience of coming to the United States until she saw a photograph taken by him—a man with a backpack. It struck her so hard as to create a crevice in her assumed knowledge about border crossing and led her to tap into her spouse's experience at a personal level. This prompted Kristine to take a new direction in her project. Initially, her essay draft was written from her perspective, expressing where she comes from, what she faced, and how she felt about it. She later decided to change the tone and began to write her essay from her child's perspective. Kristine imagined how a little child might make sense of her father's absence while waiting for him to come back. Once she changed her tone and perspective, the process of creating her photoessay was emotionally easy for her. As she put it:

If I just pour my emotion, like all these are how I feel [people might feel sympathy toward me.] I didn't want to be seen that, I didn't want people to feel like this, “Oh poor Kristine, oh I can’t believe that she is doing this. It must be a horrible situation going through.

By taking control of self-representation, Kristine rejected a potential image of herself as a pathetic wife and mother and forged a different self-image as an individual who faces her challenge without fear and in consideration of the relationship of other people involved in the challenge. As suggested in Kristine’s experience, participatory photography can assist adult learners in creating images about themselves and challenging predominant views of them.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter, I discussed participatory visual methods within a framework of visual methods and offered their potential implications for adult learning. The literature suggests that there was no lack of interest in the idea of participatory visual methods in the field of adult education; what is more markedly lacking is a systematic analysis of relevant practices from the perspective of adult learning. As suggested in my analysis, adults’ experiences with participatory visual methods are overwhelmingly positive. I believe, therefore, bringing to the forefront relevant practices together and probing into them in relation to the discourse on adult education can provide a springboard for the development of participatory visual methods for teaching adults.

**References**


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