

# Combining Open Pedagogy and Undergraduate Qualitative Research

## *PhotoVoice as Method Toward Relational Reflexivity*

Karina Lissette Cespedes<sup>1</sup>

James R. Paradiso<sup>2</sup>

Keywords: Open Pedagogy, Pressbooks, PhotoVoice, Cultural Studies, Relational Reflexivity

---

### ***Abstract***

Applying open pedagogical principles within the field of cultural and ethnic studies provides students with the opportunity to engage in reflections that capture the complexities of learning in an era of polarization—with national debates emerging on the role of pedagogy and the impact of environmental and public health uncertainty in the aftermath of how COVID-19 transformed the economic, social, and educational landscape. This article considers what it means to teach and to learn during this epoch and assesses how a student-centered framework prioritizing relationality and relational reflexivity can refocus engagement via a dynamic process by which students are simultaneously empowered to learn and contribute to knowledge production.

### **Introduction**

#### ***Higher Education: A Practical Endeavor***

The academy, entrusted with a mandate to meet the needs of current and future generations, looks vastly different than in the past. Today's campuses readily provide educational experiences that foster dialogue between both students well-accustomed to institutions of higher learning and those who may be historically disconnected from the university's larger cultural and educational context. Over the years, the authors, as first-generation educators, have witnessed the rise of the importance of connecting learning to a larger inquiry into how students can fully access skills that enhance cultural literacy and through which to share ideas beyond the confines of assignments and assessments.

As Paolo Freire persuasively demonstrated, cultural literacy aims to engage active learners in reading the world, not just the words, and provide solutions to real-world needs. Freire noted that a fundamental goal of higher education is advanced literacy and that through engaged literacy, students

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA; <sup>2</sup> Associate Instructional Designer,

University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA

E-mail: [Karina.Cespedes@ucf.edu](mailto:Karina.Cespedes@ucf.edu)

doi:10.13001/joerhe.v2i1.7885 [CC-BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

can transition from passive consumers to producers of knowledge (Freire and Macdeo, 2005). Thus, the goal of higher education becomes to expose both the student and the pedagogue to the skill sets needed beyond rote tasks. Pedagogically, we shift our emphasis based on the spaces in which we teach and frame our respective pedagogical approaches to consider the kinds of learning environments that need to be created for any specific cohort of students.

The potential of an emerging post-COVID-19 educational reordering moves us to address how relational reflexivity (Cespedes et. al., 2021) can impact and encourage students by providing a lens through which to understand the identification of significant research topics—enhancing notions of local and learning communities (as well as the ebb and flow of reciprocity) alongside active learning bolstered by the organizing principle that students bring a wealth of knowledge into the learning environment. This approach is connected to what Gloria Anzaldúa described as *la facultad*, a second sight, “to see in the surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (Anzaldúa, 2007, pp. 60-61). In this article, we suggest students can learn about relational reflexivity through the creation of openly licensed content using digital tools, such as Pressbooks, and methods, such as PhotoVoice.

### ***The Dilemma***

In 2019, the authors met when Jim was assigned to work with Karina as her instructional designer. Each respectively held over a decade of teaching experience within various fields and disciplines at both large and small state institutions (Karina in cultural studies, ethnic studies, women’s studies, Caribbean, Latinx, and African American studies, and Jim in English composition, language acquisition, and online pedagogy). While working with Karina as she underwent the University of Central Florida’s (UCF) online instructor training: IDL6543, Jim inquired about Karina’s digital assignments, and she shared a pedagogical dilemma—she wanted to know how she might design a project-based assignment not dependent on multiple-choice assessments, as the thought of multiple-choice exams was misaligned with her pedagogical and student learning assessment goals. Therefore, she decided to turn her focus to designing an online version of previously successful project-based assignments that she had developed for in-person instruction. During twelve years of teaching, Karina always favored promoting authentically original student assignments, as depersonalized, rote memorization tests seemed less than ideal for promoting student learning and engagement. Thus, as a possible solution to the “assignment/assessment” problem, Jim mentioned using Pressbooks (an online educational tool), explaining that the software had the potential to turn qualitative student projects into published monographs that would remain with students well beyond the confines of their higher education journey (e.g., professional portfolios, resumes, etc.).

From the onset, our work with Pressbooks facilitated a shared commitment to elevating student voices and enhancing student engagement—with an understanding that by incorporating student projects and student writing (from the greatest to the least inspired), the benefits of reflexive learning outweighed the immediate gratification of rote testing. Moreover, after teaching across multiple institutions and modalities, we found that student reflections best capture the complexities of learning in an era of polarization—with national debates emerging on the role of pedagogy and as the impact of

environmental and public health uncertainty in the aftermath of how COVID-19 transformed the economic, social, and educational landscape.

While the tools by which to execute dynamic open assignments are critical (e.g., Pressbooks), this work also needed to be grounded in a meaningful methodological framework. One particular ‘assignment framework’ that has facilitated open pedagogical practices is incorporating PhotoVoice projects (as an introduction to community-based participation) into the academic course flow. Therefore, to build skill sets within qualitative research that would also empower students to engage with their communities meaningfully, the PhotoVoice research method was applied to the assignment structure. PhotoVoice is a qualitative research method that has been woven into several fields and academic disciplines for its versatility and engagement with the community (Dmello & Kras, 2021; Jehangir et al., 2022). This method was developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Burris with the aim of combining Paolo Freire’s notion of “advanced literacy” with an emphasis on the importance of voice, photography, and documenting community engagement, interests, and needs (Wang and Burris, 1997). In Karina’s courses, students are introduced to PhotoVoice, and the various components of this research method are separated into steps for students to follow as they identify how to 1) interact with a potential participant and 2) understand ethical research practices when engaging in qualitative research that collects non-numerical data to assess and understand topics, concepts, perspectives, and experiences.

## Enhancing Student Engagement Through Relational Reflexivity

Relational reflexivity, as an educational philosophy, deems learning as a product of a robust society. Relational reflexivity is a method of learning in which we invite learners into a dialogic relationship with content material offered within the course. Learning as relational reflexivity means that conceiving something requires understanding its essential elements and locating it in its place and time. Being reflective in learning aims to link what has been learned with how it was learned and determine whether an application can be developed to address newly discovered topics. It reinforces learning as relational and reciprocal—providing connectedness and a sense of place. It gauges student understanding of concepts via how those concepts encourage engagement, and the depth of this understanding can be accessed via the teaching of a qualitative method through which both ‘mastery of content’ and ‘mastery of analysis’ can be determined by the end-product or project. Ultimately, students aim to master “...the relationship between our knowledge and our practice: how we engage, critique and test ideas and theories in practice, and upon what basis we make judgments” (Dyke, 2015, p. 549). A relational approach enables engaging with environmental science topics covered across disciplines via the qualitative analysis of personal experience: 1) doing science, 2) gauging public perspective, and 3) testing existing scientific ideas in practice. The PhotoVoice project on wastewater in Brazil entitled, [Sewage: A Problem of a Developing Country](#), for example, accomplishes these three components and can be replicated across various disciplines.

## Elevating Student Voice Through PhotoVoice Projects in Pressbooks

PhotoVoice is often utilized by social science researchers interested in assessing what is significant to a community. Participants receive an open-ended question from the researcher, allowing the participant to provide images and statements which capture their lived experiences. Once materials from the participant(s) are received, the researcher and participant craft an analysis of the materials provided with the goal of creating an end-product. The end-product brings to light important experiences of the participant and explores the interconnectedness of larger social, scientific, or environmental topics and the experiences of communities. PhotoVoice, as a research method, establishes collaboration between researcher and participant. Faculty within and outside of the social sciences and humanities may find that incorporating PhotoVoice within their courses can assist students in making more extensive connections between key concepts and real-world experiences and applications. The relational reflexivity component of the research method builds a cognitive and social bridge for students to understand better a topic or problem needing a solution.

Pressbooks (put simply) provides a way for students to create renewable artifacts (via project-based learning) and publicly or privately display them as book chapters. This software is extremely versatile and offers a considerable upside for students, as it provides them with the opportunity to share and publish their work in personal and professional settings (if they so choose)—guaranteeing their hard work does not simply get read by the instructor and deposited into a list of projects never to be seen or accessed again outside the confines of the learning management system (LMS). Pressbooks also provides a method of accomplishing an educational context beyond what the renowned Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire described as “the banking system of education” (where students passively receive content from their instructors) (Freire and Macdeo, 2005). Instead, it offers a more dynamic learning environment where students actively participate in the creation of new knowledge that can be preserved throughout the life of the course and even integrated into future iterations of the course—as exemplars for the next cohort of students—exercising elements found in the principals of open pedagogy (Baran & AlZoubi, 2020; Seraphin et al., 2019).

Using Pressbooks to help students elevate their work through PhotoVoice provides a useful exemplar for how to teach and to learn “openly” during this unique moment in history and illustrates how a student-centered framework applied through the principles of PhotoVoice allows us to prioritize relationality and relational reflexivity. We focus on reflexivity because it engages a dynamic process by which, as scholars, educators, and learners, we consider pedagogical formation, location, and questions of disidentification within a powerful matrix.

Consider the project mentioned earlier on wastewater in Brazil. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, this student returned to their home country of Brazil and captured the dilemma of sewage and the lived reality of the community in that time and place, which now serves as a first-hand account of their experiences during lockdown. Introducing students to PhotoVoice gives them a solid understanding of how course content can be applied and transformed into self-authored (open) works

that engage deeply with crafting information. And ultimately, students are aware that PhotoVoice is one of many qualitative research methods that bolster the student learning experience, which can be additionally enhanced through open practices.

### ***Pressbooks Open Pedagogy Assignment: From Design to Implementation***

As students embarked on their open research projects Pressbooks, specific guidelines and instructions were provided on creating individual chapters within the platform. It would have been possible to break students into groups to create a chapter, but in order to increase agency and autonomy, the assignment was designed to be completed individually. Education regarding the PhotoVoice research methodology was accomplished through Karina's class lectures and supported by online articles and instructions produced by researchers that masterfully deploy the method. Students also benefited from accessing multiple examples of successful PhotoVoice projects available on the open web as well as those produced by peers who had previously taken Karina's courses. In terms of lessons learned, one valuable takeaway was that supplying videos on how to undertake PhotoVoice research proved extraordinarily helpful to students, and that merely asking students to read about the PhotoVoice research method, or peruse completed projects, was simply not enough for a fully online course environment.

The [Pressbooks Open Pedagogy Assignment Template](#) is an openly-licensed learning module (available in the Canvas Commons) that can be downloaded, edited, and shared per the license terms: [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.](#)]

## **Discussion**

The introduction of a qualitative research method like PhotoVoice offered students the benefits of enhanced dialogue as well as engaged sociality and conviviality between students as they grew to share their experiences. This assignment also provided students with the added benefit of engaging with the symbiotic process of relational student-centered learning, which sits in direct contrast to multiple-choice exams that tend to make the transmission of a research method or skill set quite difficult to gauge—Yes, multiple-choice may be easier to grade, but it tells very little about what students have learned or how they have applied their learning. How is it, for example, that a cohort of first-year students versus students in their final year organize information and ultimately make meaning of what they encounter? Rote testing may not be a useful method through which to arrive at an answer for this question and may additionally intensify the disconnection between students and the information they encounter in their coursework.

Some pedagogical schools of thought would make a case for reserving research method training for more advanced students. However, Karina has found that if the practical question of “What can be done with all this information?” can be frontloaded via an open pedagogy framework, method, and skillset, then the pitfalls regarding learning outcomes and engagement lessen—particularly for first-generation postsecondary students, like Karina and Jim. The valuable insights pedagogues glean

from qualitative research assignments provide the practitioner with information on where (from the vast sea of content covered online or in-person over the course of a semester) students individually and collectively focused, as well as what they identified as significant in their learning adventure.

When students engage in the act of narration (i.e., the production of knowledge), their learning experience is transformed from passive consumption into active knowledge generation. Thus, once a student-centered learning environment is created, the students can bring all they know and observe about the world to the work they accomplish (via assignments, projects, etc.). Students already hold a wealth of knowledge and are able to activate their autonomy as thinkers when the learning environment is conducive to doing so. Student-centered learning intentionally avoids the regurgitation of content, instead inviting students to share their ideas.

As educators, we engage the pedagogical challenges from our respective vantage points with the understanding that students are situated to learn along a continuum. We turn then to problem-posing education, which allows students to become actors in learning and overcome a residual sense of limitations with the aim that students will see themselves as knowledge producers within a dynamic community. Pressbooks is an exceptional platform for this type of work as it almost naturally establishes a dialogical relation between the teacher and student, who become jointly responsible for the final product. Dialogic participation holds a deep purpose in which sharing stories (creating narratives of what we witness) becomes a means to assist others (Kovach, 2010). Dialogue based on open pedagogical principles allows for thinking exercises that prod problem assessment and solving—promoting active reciprocal acts of teaching and learning. Hence, education can be viewed as the practice of communal engagement: the act of becoming aware of topics and matters deserving of attention, as exemplified in a collection of student stories from Karina’s courses in [\*From the Bottom Up: Student voices on intersections of environment and community\*](#).

## Conclusion

The promise of openly shared, student-generated knowledge resides in its potential to foster relational reflexivity and address complex questions as a community while acknowledging the significance of each student’s unique contributions to a larger conversation. Moreover, providing students with the opportunities to practice the art of transforming their curiosity into a research question while applying an appropriate method (i.e., a framework through which to address their curiosity) develops critical, transferable skills to their personal, academic, and professional lives. Through these open pedagogy projects, students bring their unique questions, personalities, writing styles, and impressive imaginations to edify those with whom they engage now and in the future.

## **Acknowledgements**

Karina would like to thank her dear friend Olokun for their intellectual inspiration. Many thanks to students whose work is featured in this publication, and to Santiago Cortes Cespedes for being a daily reminder of why relational reflexivity within pedagogy is essential. Thank you Roe Bubar and Jera King for sharing a treasure trove of pedagogical stories, and Libby for the years of unwavering support.

James would like to thank his lovely spouse Priscilla and two beautiful children—Alec and Ana Laura—whose unwavering love, support, and understanding motivate him to be the best version of himself, personally and professionally. I love you all very much!

The authors would also like to thank the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning for continuing to support the work of open education across academic departments, particularly in those that leverage digital learning modalities to enhance student success.

## **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors have no conflict of interest to state.

## References

- Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands: The new mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Baran, E., & AlZoubi, D. (2020). Affordances, challenges, and impact of open pedagogy: Examining students' voices. *Distance Education, 41*(2), 230-244.
- Céspedes, K., Souza, C., Bubar, R., & Bundy-Fazioli, K. (2021). A queer decolonial feminist approach to teaching intersectionality. *Gender, Race, and Class in the Lives of Today's Teachers: Educators at Intersections, 103-120*.
- Dmello, J. R., & Kras, K. R. (2021). Photovoice as a research technique for student learning and empowerment: A case study from a south Texas border town. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 32*(4), 513-536.
- Dyke, M. (2015). Reconceptualising learning as a form of relational reflexivity. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 36*(4), 542-557.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (2005). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Routledge.
- Jehangir, R. R., Collins, K., & Molengraff, T. (2022). Class matters: Employing photovoice with first-generation poor and working-class college students as a lens on intersecting identities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000417>
- Kovach, M. (2010). Conversation method in Indigenous research. *First Peoples Child & Family Review, 5*(1), 40-48.
- Seraphin, S. B., Grizzell, J. A., Kerr-German, A., Perkins, M. A., Grzanka, P. R., & Hardin, E. E. (2019). A conceptual framework for non-disposable assignments: Inspiring implementation, innovation, and research. *Psychology Learning & Teaching, 18*(1), 84-97.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior, 24*(3), 369-387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>