Chapter 18

Medical Sociology and Storytelling in a Decolonial Context:
Exploring Photovoice as a Critical Pedagogical Tool

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ABSTRACT

The use of photovoice for storytelling and as a critical pedagogical tool is still exploratory. Despite calls to rethink, re-imagine, and rework curriculums, many challenges remain in designing assessments that utilize creative storytelling formats that demonstrate an awareness of the social context, history, and lived realities of students. This chapter addresses the outcomes of a classroom-based study that explored whether a photovoice essay, used in a medical sociology undergraduate assessment, facilitated a critical analysis of the social determinants of health by students, and oriented them towards taking action. Existing research on critical pedagogy tends to focus on investigating the feasibility or extent of dialogical exploration of societal hegemonies, and prospects of future transformations between teachers and students in the classroom. This chapter provides an overview of how photovoice and reflective writing are used to create new stories by students in a South African university and how it can be supported.

INTRODUCTION

Decolonization in higher education remains a controversial topic because of power struggles related to conceptualizations such as "Who is knowledgeable?" and "What kind of knowledge matters and what counts as knowledge?" In Africa, as in many postcolonial contexts, there is a call for academics, researchers, educators, institutions, and leaders to produce content that reflects Africa's new reality as a free continent. Scholars and analysts have suggested that to ensure inclusivity, knowledge production

in higher learning should resonate from indigenous contexts as this will nurture unique identities, social consciousness, and freedom (Memmi, 2013). Others have argued that while decolonization efforts should be collaborative and inclusive, considering earlier injustices by imperialists, they should allow indigenous groups to spearhead the process related to pedagogy (Lalu & Murray, 2012).

Central to decolonization are efforts to recognize the inputs of colonized people across the world in attempts to remedy past wrongs. In South Africa, the University of the Western Cape (UWC) is one institution that has been at the forefront of this process of decolonization. Current efforts by the institution have influenced curriculum development and pedagogical practices across departments. The University has highlighted staff engagement, ongoing debates, challenges, and efforts to decolonize and Africanize the curriculum across disciplines.

Despite variations in its conceptualization across disciplines, decolonization is compatible with Freirean principles of critical pedagogy (Zembylas, 2018). At the core of decolonization are resistance to Eurocentric views, acknowledgment of the contributions of colonized populations, righting the wrongs of imperialism, fighting injustices, disrupting hegemony, empowering enslaved people, and retributive justice. Likewise, Freirean critical pedagogy foregrounds education for empowerment, critical consciousness, reflections, emancipation, social inequalities, and collective action as a path to social transformation (MacKinlay & Barney, 2014).

Critical pedagogy espouses political and moral practices as core educational tools that could bring about democracy (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). It emphasizes teacher-learner engagement that aims to emancipate by disrupting hegemony or forces of oppression that create segregation among people. Critical perspectives and means enable oppressed populations to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their realities. As forces of globalization shape and reproduce societies, critical pedagogical tools are required to investigate advancements, progress, gains, and losses. Given the historical legacy of apartheid in South Africa and the need for civic courage, critical viewpoints and tools become imperative.

This chapter presents a case study of the author's utilization of a significant pedagogical tool, photovoice, which is a mix of photography and reflective essays, to integrate students' perspectives in a health/medical sociology undergraduate class. The first part provides an overview and the general aim of the chapter. The second section provides definitions, a literature review on contexts of photovoice use in teaching, and the theoretical underpinnings of the project. This analysis provides the background for understanding its utility as a significant pedagogical tool that changes the dynamic of storytelling across disciplines in the humanities. The third section describes the photovoice process as pedagogy and a research method. Discussions of the practical implications of using photovoice follow this. Thereafter, recommendations and conclusions are presented.

BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the fourth term of 2019, the UWC urged faculties to rethink their curricula in line with national goals of decolonization and empowerment. The author, a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, was part of the academic regeneration team at the institution. Part of the guiding question was to rethink and re-imagine what a relevant, responsive, and innovative curriculum for the department would look like. In response, the author introduced photovoice, an innovative pedagogical tool to foster experiential learning among students by connecting them to their own lived realities while grounding them in sociological theories and concepts.

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