

Transfer Student Photovoice: Developing Sense of Community at Sacramento State

Erin Rose Ellison, PhD / Department of Psychology / College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies



INTRODUCTION

At Sacramento State, more than half of all students enter as transfer students, and thus face unique challenges to academic success (Townsend, 2008) and wellbeing related in part to a feeling of social disconnection in their new community (Tinto, 2002). When I arrived at Sacramento State in fall of 2017 two Transfer Student Association (TSA) representatives approached me because they were interested in increasing access to resources for transfer students, and increasing transfer student sense of community (SOC), which they believed would in turn improve their scholarly achievement. Indeed, studies have shown SOC to be associated with academic success and positive health outcomes (Townley et al., 2013).

Subsequently, I designed a preliminary research project, recruited a team of transfer students and trained them to conduct qualitative research. In the spring of 2018 my research team engaged in preliminary research with transfer students across the university (3 focus groups, n = 21). These focus groups were led by the transfer student researchers. We analyzed focus group data and presented preliminary results at the university and a professional organization conference, through a poster presentation and a symposium talk, respectively. Our qualitative analysis suggested that transfer student identity endures beyond the semester they transfer, as students understand themselves as transfers throughout their university experience, and students expressed a desire for life-stage appropriate SOC development and support, as transfer students are more like to be older than first-time freshmen and/or are non-traditional students, with full-time employment, family responsibilities and long commutes (Ellison et al., 2018).

To continue this line of action research, we deepened our study using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. PAR is a methodology increasingly used across populations lacking an equitable share of resources to foster empowerment and work toward institutional, community, and/or social change (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). PAR facilitates critical examination of social issues and social action by involving those most impacted by a given situation (e.g., challenges of transfer students to socially and academically adjust to CSUS) in the research process (Maguire, 1987). In this PAR project, we utilized the Photovoice method (i.e., photography, dialog and writing; Wang & Burris, 1997) to ask the following research questions: What is your experience as a transfer student? What are appropriate ways to build SOC among transfer students? How might that climate be more supportive for transfer students to build SOC? This process resulted in 39 photographs with 39 essays. The essays were used as textual data that transfer students collectively engaged in preliminary thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) in spring of 2020 and then finalized and presented in spring and summer of 2021. We utilized a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) to actively work against deficit conceptions of low income BIPOC transfer students and create a transfer student-driven narrative.

FUNDING OUTCOMES

Faculty instruction and support for 6 students to conduct research: Photovoice textual analysis and evaluation data collection and preliminary analysis

- Students learned Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2012) and completed analysis of 39 essays
- Students learned interviewing skills, conducted and transcribed 4 interviews

Research dissemination

- Faculty member and 5 students attended APA Division 27 - Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) Biennial Conference to present our research
- 3 different presentations (2 student-led, 1 faculty)
- Engaged in learning, networking and mentoring opportunities

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF CURRENT RESEARCH

Photovoice Analysis (Cerola, Miranda & Ellison, 2021)

1. Transfer students are resilient, relationships (on and off campus) play an important role in resilience
2. Transfer students are balancing identities
3. Transfer students need an outlet to communicate desires for change

PAR Photovoice Project Evaluation (Cerola, Miranda & Ellison, 2021 ; Ellison, 2021; Zhou, Guillen-Chaine, Nunez & Corona, 2021)

1. Change takes time but multi-year cohorts are difficult to manage
2. Natural disasters and pandemics can get in the way of the action phase (but all is not lost)
3. Relationships created in PAR project helped participant-researchers to utilize a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) instead of focusing on pain or utilizing a deficit orientation in research and analysis
4. Transfer students were able to create community and their own narrative of transfer student lived-experiences.

METHOD

Multi-year PAR project: Participants

Included 22 students from diverse backgrounds over 6 semesters enrolled in a capstone and/or independent study class.

- 9 students were able to participate for more than one semester. 2 students were with the group for 3 semesters!
- Gender: 16 women, 5 men, 1 non-binary individual
- Race: Latinx = 8, White = 6, Black = 4, Asian American = 4
- Other intersections of identities: queer and trans students, older “re-entry” students, Dreamers, students who were refugees or from families who sought refuge from armed conflict, students for whom English is not their first language nor spoken at home, and students who had experienced homelessness and domestic violence.

Data Analysis of Photovoice essays conducted

Eight participants took photos, discussed them, and then wrote corresponding essays about their lived-experiences, resulting in 39 essays, that were used for textual data.

Evaluation phase in process! Focused on participants from the Photovoice phase (n=8), four interviews completed and transcribed so far.

Previous participant-researchers were contacted via email and/or text. Participants were paired with a current undergraduate researcher based on their mutual availability. Interviews typically lasted about an hour and were conducted via Zoom and then transcribed and checked by 4 current undergraduate students.

Research questions:

How do participants make sense of their experiences doing Photovoice?

How do these experiences intersect with constructs of SOC and empowerment?

What practices within the PAR process supported students’ identities and experiences as learners and community members at Sacramento State?

DATA EXCERPTS FROM EVALUATION OF PAR PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

Interviewer Sarah: What was it about this learning that was so: intriguing?

Tye¹: Just the- the fact that like everybody’s lived experiences [...] counts for a lot, it’s not discredited, that was really cool because you don’t really think... it- the- a lot of the examples [...]when we were rea-, when we were reading the research papers like, I- (hah) give me a sec give me a sec (Interviewer: It’s okay (hahaha)) (ahahahuh) when we were reading the research papers a- ‘bout other research that had been conducted like all over the world, the way that they spoke about n- their participant [...] I admire how [...] anybody and everybody, can participate and is smart and it’s- that their- their input is valuable- that’s cool because I think that in the other more traditional classes especially like as a transfer student as a first gen low income student like growing up like all that stuff you don’t really feel like you have a place in academia um and I- like in community psychology I feel like there’s a place for everyone.

Interviewer Anne-Marie: What changes could we make to the project to make it more fun?

Ashley: That’s a good question. I do feel like it was really fun. We did it. I’m too dark. Um, can you get more fun? Um I think, I think one of the things that we were really excited for or excited about before was like the, the finalization. So, like the Showcase that we had and we were really excited to have, you know, our peers, our friends, our family members come in but more so we wanted a lot of the like um the upper Administration to come to the, to the photo show because I wanted to, you know, be able to directly tell them ourselves, you know, through the showing of our research, how we, as transfer students were feeling. And we were hoping, you know, that by doing that, it would cause something to happen within the school, because all of us were transfers. I think, almost all of us were transfer students. And, you know, even though we were the ones conducting research, a lot of it was also based on our own personal experiences. So, I think that if we were to have more of the administrative upper heads of the university actually come to the photovoice or come to the next photovoice that you guys can express to them like, exactly what, you know, we as transfer students go through. I think that it might make you feel like you had more of an impact on the campus. We definitely had some people from administration come and some of the higher-ups, but I think we had expected more, especially, you know, from all that hard work. But it was a lot of projects on campus at a time. So, you kind of gotta see it from their side to, they’re pretty busy. [...]

Interviewer Anne-Marie: [Did anyone] from administration actually came to the Showcase?

Ashley: There was a few, there was a few [administrators, mostly from the Psychology Department]. I remember, you know, we had sent out, you know, information to almost everyone. So, we wanted, you know, obviously a lot more fuel. [...] But it definitely felt good to have some of them there, but I think, you know, it obviously would have felt better to have more people. And then especially like, leaving and graduating like you don’t know what is happening at the school now so you don’t know like you know, you try to make a difference but you don’t know what difference was made versus if they were there and they were listening. You know, we saw on their faces that they knew what we were going through. Then, you know, it would have felt like ‘okay something’s going to change’.

Interviewer Daniela: What was your favorite part of being in the [project]? What was your favorite part of the photo voice project?

Anna: I think just feeling supported by everyone there. I think at that time, I probably wasn’t the most mature person. I’m still not the most mature person, but everyone there, I feel like they try their best to create a safe space and to open up a discussion. And, so it never felt like I was out of place there. And that was really cool to feel like this is a research project that I can actually participate in. So that was pretty cool.

Interviewer Audrey: What was your favorite part [the project]?

Nina: I, I believe it gave me a sense of belonging. And on campus on campus it totally grounded me (A: Ok) and gave me yeah gave me a sense of who I, who I was on campus and how I could participate in it. It helped me to succeed... I graduated!

¹ = Pseudonyms used for all past participants