
Conversations that Give Voice to Photos

From the villages of rural China to the homeless shelters of Ann Arbor, Michigan, people have used photography to amplify their visions and experiences.

I love to hold conversations that use visual aids. My good friend and professional photographer Carl Hiebert travels the world, teaching people all over the world how to document their community stories with photographs.

Photovoice, a technique with a great website, is also full of inspirational ideas for using photos to tell community stories.

Developed by Caroline C. Wang and Marry Ann Burris, Photovoice blends a grassroots approach to photography with social action by providing cameras to people who have little access to individuals affecting their lives, such as health specialists, policy makers and professionals.

Photovoice has three goals:

1. It enables people to record and reflect their community's strengths and problems.
2. It promotes dialogue about important issues through group discussion and photographs.
3. It engages policymakers and follows the premise that, "What experts think is important may not match what people at the grassroots think is important."

My experience with Photovoice began when I was asked to spend six months in conversation and training with a group of outstanding community developers. Their task was to democratize one of the country's largest housing authorities and create thousands of housing units into thousands of homes. We talked about leadership, community building, collaboration, tenant and citizen engagement, belonging, racism and just about everything a life long community developer, like me, would be interested in.

In order to facilitate this conversation, I emailed the community developers the following report.

To the world's best community developers:

Prepare for our time together next month by taking pictures of leadership that you encounter all around you every day. Fill the camera provided to you or, if you prefer, use your own digital camera. Once you have taken at least 20 pictures, take the film to be processed.

Take pictures that answer this question: What does leadership mean to you?

I challenge you to think about leadership as people in action and as a process by which people engage. You need not only take pictures of people. Other

images can remind us of leadership, such as water, flowers or sculptures. Be creative and have fun!

Bring a minimum of five pictures to our next meeting.

Sincerely,

Paul Born

I received very few responses to my email and began to wonder if anyone would actually bring any pictures. But, when our meeting began, I was pleasantly surprised. Everyone brought at least five pictures – some even brought 20! They could hardly wait to share their images with each other. As their pictures and stories circled the meeting, the room was filled with laughter and positive responses like, “Great shot!” and “Wow! That’s beautiful.”

The session opened when I asked the group about their photographic experience. The response was overwhelmingly positive. They expressed their persistent hunt to find the “right” photo, and many confessed to carrying their camera with them everywhere, just in case the perfect picture presented itself. Isn’t it interesting how a camera can open our eyes?



The group’s next task was to divide into smaller groups. Using a large sheet of poster board and markers, they were instructed to share their favourite pictures with each other and explain how each picture answered the question, “What does leadership mean to me?” After sharing their stories, they grouped their pictures together on the poster board according to their meaning.

The energy that emerged from this exercise was explosive. People were anxious to explain their photos to other group members. Wonderful connections were made when group members responded by saying, “That is so interesting because I came with a similar picture!” By the end of the exercise, each poster board displayed a rich collage of managers and positional leaders, work teams and people leading together, objects in motion, and abstract images of energy and vision. The spirit in the room was electrifying.

Next, I asked everyone to describe the groupings on their poster board in two or three words and to appoint an ambassador to be the keeper of the ideas expressed in the pictures. This ambassador would explain the pictures and answer questions as the rest of the participants wandered around the room to examine the collages made by the other groups. I also invited participants to move around the room to see the collages made by the other groups.

After 30 minutes of intimate discussion and examination of these images of leadership, we rejoined to talk more about community leadership.

It was unanimous.

We all agreed that the photographic exercise provided a fantastic opportunity to explore the issues we were discussing.

Tips for using photos to hold conversations:

- Try this exercise with groups that are going to hold multiple conversations rather than a one time discussion.
- Allow sufficient time to prepare for this exercise (at least two weeks). This gives people time to fully experience their lens as it related to the question.
- If less time is available, consider coordinating a treasure hunt around a theme and have the groups take pictures with their cameras. Participants will enjoy taking the pictures together just as much as they will enjoy sharing them afterwards.

Related Links:

- [Photovoice: Social Change through Photography](#)

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