

A Double Take: The practical and ethical dilemmas of teaching the visual method of photo elicitation

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This paper advocates the teaching of photo elicitation in higher education as a valuable data collection technique and draws on our experience of teaching this visual method across two consecutive postgraduate cohorts. Building on previous work (Watt & Wakefield, 2014) and based on a former concern regarding student duty of care, a modification was made that constrained or made less 'risky' the topic area of a photo elicitation project for the second year group. The paper compares and contrasts the effects of this change through student and tutor reflections. In Cohort 1, (year one) although the reflections of some of the students gave us cause for concern, the work produced was exceptionally creative and of an excellent standard. The work produced by the following year, Cohort 2, was of much lower quality, in the main lacked creativity which was supported by student reflection that similarly lacked depth or insight. In comparing and contrasting the two cohorts we discuss the effect of the topic change in potentially affecting student engagement, creativity and quality of work. In taking what pedagogically, we perceived as a less risky topic area, we discuss the potential this had on stifling creativity and student engagement concluding that ours should serve as a cautionary tale that there is a need to be careful in what we wish for; a less risky topic equated to less risky work and affected student engagement.

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TYPICALLY the teaching of qualitative methods in psychology involves techniques such as interviewing, focus groups and observation. Yet the use of qualitative research methods is evolving and growing in its usage in psychology (Willig, 2008) and holds much potential to include other creative techniques which seek to gain hermeneutical understanding of individuals' experiences (Ashworth, 2007; Smith, 2009). One such area of qualitative enquiry is that of Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) which draws on a variety of creative techniques, such as poetry and dance, to explore and gather data of participant lived experience; experience which is socially and culturally situated (Parry & Johnson, 2007; Richardson, 2000). A further data collection technique which falls under the umbrella of CAP is photo elicitation and this visual method is the focus of this paper. The use of photographs in eliciting thoughts and feelings can be highly useful alongside partici-

pant interviews but additionally photographs can be a data collection method in itself; one that is highly useful when collaboratively working with participants.

A good example of this is Graham and Kilpatrick's (2010) study which investigated the dynamics of poverty across a densely populated community. Ethnographic in approach this study gathered data in discrete stages from a diverse range of community sources such as, the local school, parents, support workers and importantly, and with strict ethical consent and assent, from children. The researchers asked the children to take photographs with the remit, 'tell me about your life'. These insightful photographs of the children's homes, pets, siblings, possessions, etc., allowed insight into the children's living conditions and formed the basis of enquiry between the researchers and the children who were later asked to tell them more about their photographs and their lives. While such photo-

graphs qualify as research data in themselves, importantly they also offer the opportunity of photovoice (cf. Wang & Burris, 1997) where the participants become the 'authors of the photographs' (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007, p.850). Photographs then, can be used in a variety of ways to elicit participants' thoughts and feelings in an interview (Rose, 2012), aid memory through recollection (Reavey, 2011), or facilitate reflection (Wakefield & Watt, 2012). As explained by Harper (2002, p.23), 'photographs appear to capture the impossible, a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared'. This process in itself assists in 'empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible' (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007, p.850). In collaborating with participants in this way, we as researchers become privileged to richer data. Behar (2003, p.16) suggests that in qualitative research we 'go to find the stories that often go unheard', to investigate the 'really real'; the underlying scope and power that photographs elicit adds depth to participant stories, stimulating associations and points of interest that can be further explored. As qualitative researchers our priority and responsibility must be to ensure that the words and stories of our participants are fully 'heard' and we would argue that photographs provide the ideal medium to do this.

In psychology, photo elicitation has been used as a research method in a number of sub-disciplines including sport psychology (Wakefield & Watt, 2012), educational psychology (Graham & Kilpatrick, 2010), and health psychology (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). However, the use of visual methods more generally in psychology curricula remains limited and too often, CAP and its various methods of data collection, or its capacity for experiential expression, is overlooked. One of the few examples evaluating its use in the classroom was explored in a sociological study by Schell et al. (2009). They identified a lack of research in the

teaching and learning of visual methods and subsequently set their students the task of a photovoice project. The purpose of the project was to photograph a research interest or lived experience with students acting as both the researcher and the researched. Both tutors and students reported a positive experience; one that they identified as a highly useful research method that encouraged critical thinking and a new way of seeing the world.

An aim of our own study was to see if psychology students would similarly report a positive learning experience. Like Schell et al. (2009) we introduced photo elicitation to postgraduate students who were studying on either an MSc in Research Methods or Psychology programme respectively. The students on these two programmes came together for compulsory research methods modules and the photo elicitation assessment was one of several qualitative assessments set across the year. In terms of student learning objectives, these were to, give students understanding of photo elicitation as a research method, practical hands on experience of using the method together with experience of being both the researcher and the researched; to reflect and critically evaluate the method of photo elicitation, their experience of both research roles; to reflect on their learning in respect of their chosen topic area and finally, to further embed their group work skills and reflect on the group work process.

From a pedagogic perspective our aim was to create what we hoped would be an exciting opportunity for our postgraduates, to create a collaborative learning environment that promoted student learning by encouraging creativity, self-reflection (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) and potentially, one that encouraged a discourse of 'possibility' (Bain, 2010). While the assessment necessarily conformed to the prescriptive nature of institutional summative feedback, nevertheless, it remained a creative project that gave students the opportunity to gain experience of working collaboratively on a

project that was typically less conventional of our postgraduate programme but one, that spoke to the students in terms of their lived experience or research interests.

This paper discusses our experience of two year groups who undertook the photo elicitation project across two consecutive years and builds on previous work (Watt & Wakefield, 2014). In line with the above learning objectives the work of the first cohort, hereafter known as Cohort 1, will be contrasted with the photographs and reflections of the students in Cohort 2. In conducting the photo elicitation project, students worked in groups of three to four. Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) suggest that the use of photovoice in a participatory manner can evoke change. The intention with the assessment set was that it was both participatory and gave students opportunity to collaboratively work and learn from each other.

However, despite our earlier work (Watt & Wakefield, 2014) which highlighted the benefits and potential for photo elicitation within a curriculum, some unexpected issues gave cause for concern regarding Cohort 1 in respect of the chosen topic areas or at least, the degree to which the parameters had veered away from what had ethically been agreed with tutors. It is not possible or appropriate to fully reveal the specifics of these issues other than to say that some students in some groups emotively spoke freely about death and suicide. This became distressing for some of the students listening and watching the related photographs at the presentation and later, student concern was similarly reflected in the individual report commentaries. This highlighted to us a duty of care concern for both the students, who revealed highly personal details of their lives and their loved ones, but also, those students who found the presentations upsetting and those students who worked in the groups where the topic area had been extended more generally. Therefore, the present study reported here replicates the work of Watt and Wakefield (2014), but while it still aims

to promote a discourse of collaborative possibility regarding the assessment and the experience therein, we chose a tighter assessment brief in respect of the topic area, the outcome of this decision provides the basis for comparison between the two cohorts. The aims of this study were, therefore, to compare the assessment differences and student reflections of two student cohorts who were given different topic briefs regarding a photo elicitation project; to evaluate student perceptions of the project and the method employed; further, as tutors to reflect on our perceptions and experience regarding how each cohort engaged with the assessment and its potential for creativity.

Method

Participants

In our previous work (Watt & Wakefield, 2014), 30 postgraduate students took part (22 females and eight males; age range 21 to 58 years). For the purpose of comparison, these participants will now be known as Cohort 1 in this paper. Cohort 2 is comprised of students who undertook the same project in the subsequent academic year. Cohort 2 consisted of 28 participants (15 females and 13 males; age range 21 to 56 years). All participants engaged with the project as part of a postgraduate taught curriculum and provided informed consent regarding the subsequent use of their work and reflections in publications. Institutional ethical approval was also obtained in respect of the student projects themselves and the cohort comparison reported here.

Procedure

Both cohorts were required to self-select and work in groups of three to four on the assessment; 'undertake a creative analytic project focussed on photo elicitation'. Here, the students were required to use photographs (either existing or purpose-taken) of a particular aspect of social life. Specifically, based on their photographs and those of their group members, they engaged in the process of photo elicitation and shared their

subsequent reflections. To reiterate the learning outcomes, these were to gain understanding and practical experience of a lesser known research method; to gain hands-on experience as both the researcher and the researched; to reflect and critically evaluate the research method and the dual research roles assumed; to reflect on their learning regarding their chosen topic area and, finally, to further embed group work skills and to subsequently reflect on the group work process. Each student was required to take/provide five photographs that they would later share with their group members.

In total five groups made up Cohort 1 and students negotiated their topic area with one of their two tutors. In this respect we needed to ensure that the topic area was ethically appropriate and that all ethical issues had been fully considered. For example, that in line with the British Psychology Society's (BPS) *Code of Conduct*, students would only take photographs in locations where members of the public were in public spaces where they might expect to be photographed and that any such photographs would not focus on members of the public in the foreground. In Cohort 1, topic areas largely focused on identity such as 'then and now' with students identifying school photographs and juxtaposing them with workplace or university photographs and identifying the changes they had experienced.

However, although the topic areas agreed with Cohort 1 were ethically approved as appropriate and safe, the reality found some groups delving into emotionally charged aspects of their lives, or those of their loved ones both present and past. While in psychology we encourage our students to engage and apply psychological theory and to be critically reflective, and while some highly interesting, thoughtful and creative work was produced, it transpired that not all group members had been comfortable with subtle changes in direction that some of their group members had taken. Further some of the students reported that they had

been denied opportunity to voice their concerns around the change of direction their group project had taken. It also became clear that even for some of the students who had both, driven and trod, a highly personal and emotive path, their reflective comments indicated a degree of regret in taking such a deep approach. However, while this raised our concerns around student duty of care, only two groups out of the five had gone down this very personal route. Of the other three groups in Cohort 1, students had focused on topics such as their education identity transition, representations of nature and finally, city tourist locations in the north-west of England. All the groups produced work of a very high quality, particularly those groups who pursued what we came to perceive as, less risky topic areas. Some of the pastoral issues we retrospectively reflected upon found us questioning the underpinning pedagogy regarding the topic area element of the photo elicitation project and as a precautionary measure we decided to constrain the topic area to 'Place and Space' for Cohort 2. In terms of 'Place' as the data will later illustrate this opened up photographic possibilities that looked at physical places or aspects of locations, for example, again tourist attractions, while 'Space' threw new light on how people engaged with or used the chosen spaces in question.

In both cohorts, each student took five photographs, they were then required to write a reflective comment on the thoughts and feelings their photographs elicited. They then shared copies of their photographs with each of their group members and in turn each group member shared copies of their own photographs with their respective group members. The students then wrote a reflective comment on the thoughts and feelings that each of their group members' photographs had elicited. As a group the students then held a reflective meeting(s) during which they thematically ordered their respective photographs and finally they drew together their reflective

comments. The objective of this was to look for similarities and differences, for example, in respect of opinion, perceptions and emotions

The assessment comprised of three elements that met the learning outcomes. First, the groups undertook a class presentation, which platformed their photographs alongside the similarities and differences they found across the group members' perceptions and reflections. Alongside they also produced an A3 poster which following the presentations, stimulated informal discussion of the photographs amongst the students and tutors. Each student then produced an individually written report which critically evaluated their perception of the effectiveness of photo elicitation as a data collection method, their reflective experience of using the method and taking both research roles. Included in the report, was also a reflexive narrative of the effectiveness of the group working process and more generally student thoughts on their experience of the photo elicitation process.

In Cohort 1 then, students had free reign to explore a topic of their own choosing but based on previous experience (cf. Watt & Wakefield, 2014), we decided that with Cohort 2 the following year, the topic area should be more neutrally confined to that of 'Place and Space'.

Ethics

Working in groups as both the researcher and the researched raised some unique ethical dimensions and experiences for the students. The group members had to agree and draw up a signed contract of conduct with regard to respecting each other's viewpoints and maintaining privacy of information shared. An interesting and rewarding point to note was the serious thought the students gave to the ethical dimensions of their respective projects. For example, when it came to sharing their photographs and the experiences and emotions they elicited, the students' collaborative ethical considerations refreshingly became far more than a

tick box exercise. Acting as both participant and researcher seemed to really bring home to the students the potential for disrespect or misuse of their photographs.

With regard to the photographs themselves, students were advised they could use existing photographs or they could take photographs, the only proviso being that they must follow BPS guidelines. To reiterate, as a class we agreed that while photographs could be taken in public place and spaces where people might expect to be photographed, no photographs would be taken of members of the public in the foreground of a photograph. Students in Cohort 1 negotiated the topic area with their tutors who gave ethical approval. Although, Cohort 2 was given the general topic area of 'Place and Space', they still needed to negotiate and gain ethical approval of the place or space they wished to investigate. Both cohorts were given examples of potential projects they could consider. As tutors we photographed a tourist location in order that they could see a worked example and we also illustrated our experience of photo elicitation through one of our own research projects (Wakefield & Watt, 2012). We also held workshop and drop-in sessions for students to come along to discuss their projects, progress or any areas of uncertainty or concern.

Results

Across both cohorts the students were creative in their initial approach. For example, Cohort 1 focussed on topics such as autobiographical accounts, photographic representations of emotion as depicted through nature and tourist destinations. Cohort 2, who were restricted in the brief to 'Place and Space', included student-centred environments, tourist locations and street market life. In illustrating the projects, we will present the photographs, reflections and the emergent themes from three of the groups from Cohort 2. In doing so, we will draw comparisons with Cohort 1, which are detailed in Watt and Wakefield (2014).

We will then present the student reflections on the project and the method, before ending with our own reflections on the two cohorts and our forethought regarding future projects of this kind.

Cohort 2, Group 1: Student-centred environments

This approach was an interesting one in that the group was comprised of UK and International students. As such, it took a cross-cultural approach to student life. When taking and reflecting on the photographs, the students differed in what they perceived to be a typical student environment.



For example, the UK students centred on the social aspects of student life and associated environments, while the International students focussed on more studious environments and, in particular, those that reflected technology.



However, the reflections that accompanied the photographs from both the UK and International students were descriptive in nature. When reflecting on the social student environments, such as catering and

nightlife establishments, the student reflections were highly minimal and descriptive rather than reflective. For example, 'leisure hours', 'spend good time with friends', and 'creation of new relationships amongst students'

When reflecting on the photographs taken by the International students in study environments, the comments were more detailed and had a common theme of 'technological innovation'.



This was particularly pertinent to these students who had not previously experienced such innovation in their home country. However, the reflective comments were again descriptive, particularly so by the UK students who took a dismissive approach to the familiar. For example, the photograph of the computer lab was described as 'a big spacious relaxed working area' and 'a very bright modern area with a lot of expensive technology.'



The photograph of a library self-service system was expressed simply as a mechanism that 'makes student life easier', is 'quick and

easy to use' and 'time saving'. Again these comments appear to be minimal and descriptive. However, in terms of the assessed presentation, the International students spoke of these differences with enthusiasm and fascination for technological innovation in a way that they seemed unable to express in their written accounts.

Cohort 2, Group 2: Tourist destination

Unlike Group 1, this group were specifically interested in tourist destinations. Before beginning to take photographs, they decided to focus their attention on the Albert Docks in Liverpool. The group then separated and took the photographs at different locations around the docks, as per their agreed brief. One of the emergent themes from their collective photographs was one of 'Old vs. New', where the photographs often represented this juxtaposition, but as illustrated below, they represented this in far more depth and engagement than, for example, Group 1. One such reflection expressed that:

'Old vs. New is an even deeper aspect to the lives of the docks. This is something that existed in the past and the present. Old Liverpool was the docks past, things that made it what it is today. New Liverpool represents the docks present and future.'

A further theme was that of 'Rhythm and



Ritual'. Here, when reflecting on a photograph of the Mersey Ferry completing a commuter crossing of the river, one student expressed:



'I like the metaphor of the river being the skin of a drum. After striking, when a hand leaves a drum is it really leaving the drum or is it in fact on a trajectory to return?'



Further, emphasising the ritualistic nature of a journey as a shared experience, this student explained that:

'people must have done this exact same thing since ancient times and that, river crossings like this take place all over the world and in many different types of culture.'

It is important to note that this student worked largely independently from the group, whereas the reflections of the other group members were descriptive and lacking in engagement with the photographs or the wider process.

Cohort 2, Group 3: Street Market Life

This group focussed on street market life across several markets in Lancashire and Greater Manchester. Following the taking of the photographs, the group reflected both

on their own and each other's photographs. This group very much focussed on a socio-political approach. The key emergent themes were ethnic and cultural diversity and change, and, consumer behaviour. For example, as this photograph and comment illustrates there is an increased diversity in both the products and consumers:

'an incredible mix of international cultures and contemporary thinking, held together by a strong sense of identity and tradition.'



However, despite such diversity one student reflected that generally the markets that they photographed had a sense of decline. He stated:

'there is a distinct lack of shopping activity with the space appearing to be used as a thoroughfare which is in contrast with my own recollection of the marketplace as a vibrant place of social interaction.'



The pathos of this observation is replicated in the picture below and the associated comment, which so eloquently echoes the lane's desertion:

'A lonely lane! Full with produce and promise; void of custom.'



Student reflections

Project reflections

In Cohort 1, the students generally reported a positive experience of undertaking such a project. Some students initially struggled with the abstract nature of the free reign brief they were given, as we can see with the comment below. This comment is representative of the group as a whole, as the students actively engaged with the nature and validity of the method employed:

'regardless of subjectivity and objectivity problems, because of our group collaboration and adherence, our subjective deductions are just as valid as any quantitative approach could claim to be. I would argue the case further and state that biases that affect our subjectivity can in turn give a much more fruitful outcome and I believe that this is evident in this study.'

Conversely, in Cohort 2 reflections were more varied. The students were clearly aware that this was a highly creative research method, but had mixed responses to this. For some, this proved to be too esoteric, as indicated in the two comments below:

'I was unsure about the concept and felt concerned as to whether objective results could be gathered from such a subjective and creative methodology.'

'The project should have been very interesting and yet it was very plain.'

For others, they demonstrated a willingness to engage in the creative nature of the work, but were held back by other group members,

time restraints and general inertia towards engaging with the underpinning theoretical framework. This is illustrated in the two comments below:

‘I felt the initial process was good, but it was never challenged and, therefore, never developed into a more creative piece of work.’

‘The theory we used had to be a simple one as two of the group were unwilling to invest time into researching different forms of analytical theories in order to understand the concept.’

However, for another student their perceptions of the creativity and boundaries of the brief were contradictory. As we can see, this student expresses a desire to be more creative and yet at the same time craved clearer boundaries:

‘I felt the concept was too creative and boundaries were not clear enough for me. I may have felt more in tune and submerged with this methodology should I have been free to allow my creativity to flow more.’

Ironically, the above comment is from a student in Cohort 2, who had clearer boundaries than Cohort 1, and was constrained to the topic area of ‘Place and Space’. Possibly this hampered creativity and had a constraining effect on the work produced. However, the apparent contradiction seems to indicate that this student was confused and unclear why the project did not speak to them, perhaps indicating a potential lack of engagement.

Method reflections

The students in Cohort 1 considered the use of photo elicitation to be a creative opportunity and valued the use of the method. This is illustrated through the two comments below:

‘This was a fantastic opportunity to experiment with visual ethnography and I felt immediately comfortable with the approach. Visual methods could draw out so much thick, rich person-centred data in psychology.’

‘The more I find out and think about visual methods and visual ethnography the more I value it as a research method.’

However, as we can see from the following student comment, their reflections went beyond simply the method and exhibited a deeper engagement with philosophy around, for example, the subjective nature of such a technique:

‘I have begun to truly appreciate the application of subjective qualitative analysis. Furthermore, my own biases that can arise from my own experiences can be beneficial when trying to justify links between discourse and images.’

In Cohort 2, the students’ concerns about the project itself are reflected in their perceptions of the method as a whole. Some struggled with its subjective nature and issues of bias, as indicated in the following comment:

‘Although I tried to eliminate my preconceptions, drawing on meaning of photographs felt fraught with potential bias.’

However, for the most part and theoretical frameworks aside, issues using this method were more concentrated on group members differing levels of engagement. Clearly being both the researcher and the researched created problems in itself, as commented below:

‘Working as a participant and a researcher at times can be frustrating, but equally valuable in the sense it allows a deeper understanding of the process and feelings of participants and constantly challenges the researcher bias.’

It is important to note that in cases where lack of effective group work hampered the projects, this did not necessarily result in lack of understanding for individual group members. Thus, whilst not fully achieving the assessment brief, the associated learning and reflexivity had clearly taken place for some, as the quote below illustrates:

‘By engaging in this CAP but not effectively gaining others’ elicitations (polyvocality), I have come to understand

that this report is almost entirely about me. Not merely by me but about me.'

This student concedes that he has not fully met the assessment brief, but despite group difficulties around commitment, he demonstrates an acute awareness of the difficulties in being both the researcher and the researched.

Tutor reflections

When reflecting on the process with Cohort 1, we felt that 'the students produced an amazing body of work which demonstrated their commitment and engagement'. However, as explained previously, we were concerned about the personal and overly emotional nature and direction that some of the projects took. This is an issue that we wrestled with for some time as we also believed that as 'these were not first-year students' but Master's students we should not prescribe or deny them an opportunity to be creative. Indeed we questioned our ethics regarding this. However, after much pedagogic thought, we decided to continue with this creative visual assessment, but thought it necessary to change the assessment brief to one of 'Place and Space'.

Following the presentations and reports of both cohorts, we independently reflected on the process and the associated student work, before coming together and sharing our respective reflections with one another. Upon reflecting on the work of the second cohort, we found that the projects were largely less engaging and unimaginative. This is noted in our comments:

'The projects seemed dry somehow – the students weren't enthused and committed to the project as they had been in the previous year.'

'There was no attempt at creativity; basic shots of basic places/spaces. Basic reflections, nothing that stretched the imagination or challenged preconceptions of the photograph or its framing.'

This was in stark contrast with the first cohort. This may have been owing to the more restrictive brief that the students were

given. That is, the students may have approached the project in a more creative way if they had had free reign of the topic, as Cohort 1 did. As our comment illustrates, we recognise that:

'We cannot expect students to creatively run with an idea that just leaves them cold. Pedestrian and dry, petals in the wind their projects, their photos and their reflections will just drift out of memory.'

Whilst it appears that the work was less engaging, we recognise our responsibility in this. Our first consideration for changing the nature of this assessment was one of concern for student well-being and we consider we achieved this goal. The emotionally-charged nature of the presentations in Cohort 1 was not apparent amongst the second cohort. From our perspective as tutors the presentations were far less emotive both for the audience and the presenters than the emotionally laden work of Cohort 1. As one of us commented:

'It felt much safer this time around. I could relax in the presentations without being worried about the degree of emotionality.'

However, the consequence was one of potentially stifling student creativity and we question whether the decision we took regarding the topic area, which was based on a small number of students' work or group input, hampered the student experience and the work produced by the students. As noted in the comment below, there were consequences to the assessment decision we took:

'To say the projects were pedestrian or boring would be an overstatement; but some certainly were.'

Discussion

The emergent discursive themes were similar across the two cohorts but with varying levels of student engagement and emotionality. In the first cohort, students expressed a process of empowerment and catharsis. In this respect they seemed to find the creative nature of the process empow-

ering while for others it opened up the potential to explore a cathartic path that involved reflection on personal loss. However, in the second cohort engagement was less powerful and in determining what we perceived as a less 'risky' topic area, we will go on to question our action in prescribing this topic area. The reflective comments of both cohorts expressed that the photo elicitation project and process had given them experience and a developed understanding of the scope and potential of qualitative research, albeit that for some students it was stated that the photo elicitation was a little too creative and 'out there' for them, they would instead prefer to collect data through a tighter framework that, for example, a semi-structured interview might bring.

However, some practical, ethical and pastoral dilemmas remain with us. We are conscious of the creative nature of photo elicitation projects and associated reflections, which as indicated proved to be too esoteric for some students. Some students in Cohort 1, where they had free reign over their topic area, initially struggled with the nature of the project, for example the focus of the photographs and reflections. However, the more that they deliberated over this, the more they engaged, became creative with their ideas and the deeper they looked into their photographs and the photo elicitation process itself. The result was highly powerful and creative work from all groups in this cohort. This highlights the power of photo elicitation as both an assessment tool and a research method and the critical and creative level at which students can engage. However, despite the creative nature of all of the presentations in Cohort 1 and the subsequent individual reports, two of the groups in this cohort gave us cause for concern. As psychologists we obviously want our students to be both theoretically informed and, critically evaluative and reflective but our dilemma emerged because of the depth to which a few students in these two groups delved. At the presentations it

became very clear that some students had become emotionally and physically upset at some of the revelations and in particular one of the photographs and to some extent as tutors, we too were taken aback at the emotionally laden nature of some of the students' reflections and their openness in their accounts. As a consequence, concern around student pastoral duty of care culminated in us taking possibly as a reactive decision to determine what we perceived as, a safer or less risky topic the following year.

In the second cohort then, the brief was limited to that of 'Place and Space', we invested still more workshop and drop-in sessions to ensure students were comfortable individually and in their groups with their chosen 'Place and Space' topic area. We anticipated that the students in this cohort would find the project easier to grasp because of the more specific brief, given that some of the previous cohort particularly struggled initially with project ideas. Further, and rightly or wrongly, in satisfying our own anxiety and comfort zone, we also thought the students in Cohort 2 were far less likely to become distressed albeit all topic areas in psychology will always holds some potential for individuals to liken theory or an experience to a past or present association. The reality of our experience with Cohort 2 which was made up of eight groups of either three or four group members, was diverse in terms of engagement with the process and the potential scope of the topic areas within 'Place and Space'. In the main, the projects were descriptive and prosaic in approach. Nevertheless, as the case studies of Group 2 and Group 3 above illustrate, some good work was produced by this cohort, albeit even this work still held the potential for further exploration. Regardless of the quality of the student work as a whole, there remained a 'flatness' in the work that indicated a lack of creativity and, in some cases, dis-engagement with the project, and, in particular with the process of photo elicitation. This was further apparent in the student reflections, where a lesser sense of

project ownership was apparent and indicative that some students had simply not embraced either the process of photo elicitation or qualitative philosophy *per se*.

Although we have experience of using visual methods, and specifically photo elicitation in our research (Wakefield & Watt, 2012), Cohort 1 was our first experience of teaching visual methods. We recognise that in Cohort 1 the work on the whole was exceptional and provided a strong benchmark and we have subsequently reflected upon what our response to teaching photo elicitation would have been had the cohorts been the other way around and we had first experienced the work of Cohort 2. It would be unfair of us to say we have felt disappointed at the quality of the work from Cohort 2; it is more a sense of frustration that a very able group did not fully reach their creative potential and in this respect we are left questioning our decision to restrict the topic choice and its impact on the student work and experience. If our intention was to open up a discourse of possibility, then our decision making certainly seemed to affect creative possibilities. In short we find ourselves questioning were we over cautious based on the experience of just a few individuals in Cohort 1? As such, did we then negatively confine the talents of Cohort 2? We are left with this conundrum and what feels like a no win situation but one where we find ourselves oscillating between the two. These are considerations that require further thought before we decide on how to proceed with future cohorts. Possibly we are guilty of overthinking things, psychology is what it is and we know only too well that students often enter into our discipline to 'find themselves' or 'work things through' and as such we should respect the possibilities within their work that they create for themselves.

In conclusion, we strongly recommend photo elicitation as a research method that can be taught to excellent effect in the classroom and based on our experience it can produce some excellent insightful work. Our

experience of using the photo elicitation process as an assessment piece has so far been limited to postgraduate students but it does hold the potential to be cascaded down to undergraduate level and we have experience of dissertation students who have successfully employed this method alongside semi-structured interviews and participant observation. While we still question the experiences across our two cohorts, photo elicitation is not a method to shy away from and we would actively encourage its teaching more widely in higher education. Our attempt to confine the topic area of the assessment project was to respond to a duty of care but while the work produced was safer albeit less engaging, it might have been so whether we changed the topic area or not. It might simply be a student cohort difference, that is, that our student cohort were more quantitatively orientated preferring a more rigid framework than what was perceived by some as the more creative or 'out there' construct of photo elicitation. It may well be that a specific topic brief might be more appropriate for undergraduate students who are less proficient in qualitative philosophy and its techniques, while for postgraduate students would benefit from more freedom. All that said, as highlighted in the quote below, for some students at least in Cohort 2, some did embrace the method and developed an acute awareness of the power of photo elicitation:

'the creation of the report has at least led me to understand how photographs can similarly serve as a focus to elicit the reality and relevant meanings of others.'

Therefore, we offer a cautionary tale. When including valuable qualitative methods such as photo elicitation into the curriculum, the student experience can be enhanced. This was powerful in Cohort 1 who produced work of a high quality, while restrictions placed on Cohort 2 seemed to reduce commitment, engagement and creativity. Our experience would suggest that we should be careful what we wish for. We hoped that the brief of 'Place and Space'

would result in less emotionally laden projects and this is exactly what we got; only for us, to be left questioning whether that was what we wanted after all.

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