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TWELVE TIPS

Twelve tips for medical students to facilitate a Photovoice project

Deep Jaiswal, Matthew J. To, Heather Hunter, Ciaran Lane, Cinera States, Brittany Cameron, Suzanne Kathleen Clarke, Catherine Cox and Anna MacLeod

Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

ABSTRACT

Participatory action projects, such as Photovoice, can provide medical trainees with a unique opportunity for community engagement. Through Photovoice, participants with lived experience engage in dialog and capture photographs of community issues. Participants subsequently develop narratives that accompany photos to raise awareness about community needs. In this paper, we describe twelve tips to develop a Photovoice project and discuss how medical students can engage communities through a participatory action lens. Such an approach not only serves as a method for medical students to learn about social determinants of health through the perspective of lived experience, but also has the capacity of building advocacy and community collaboration skills. Through providing a voice to marginalized individuals using Photovoice, medical students can partner with communities to work toward social change. Photovoice participants also benefit from the project as it provides them with a platform to highlight strengths and weaknesses in their community.

Introduction

A group of eight medical students (authors of this paper) engaged adolescent youth in a discussion around the components of a healthy community. The project took place in a geographically urban community with current and historical experiences of socioeconomic marginalization. We employed Photovoice as a tool as it provided participants with a creative means to facilitate critical discussions around the health of their community. Youth captured their community's lived experiences pertaining to a variety of social issues through photography. In addition, youth participants developed narratives that put the photographs they captured into a critical social context and created a platform for community action.

Participatory action projects, such as Photovoice, can provide medical trainees with a unique opportunity for community engagement (Loignon et al. 2014). In Photovoice, participants engage in dialog about community issues, photograph these issues, and provide accompanying narratives (Adekeye et al. 2014). Through photographs and narratives, participants can raise awareness about community needs and concerns to policymakers and the general public (Adekeye et al. 2014). This is important because, as we learned through our experience, it provides a practical means for medical students to engage in health advocacy and learn about first hand experiences of the communities they may potentially serve.

Furthermore, community engagement projects, such as Photovoice, are a form of service learning that result in medical students placing value in the concepts of social responsiveness and accountability (Meili et al. 2011). Service learning entails the following elements: community service, explicit learning objectives, and critical reflection

(Meili et al. 2011). In addition, balance between community service, meeting learning objectives, and collaboration between communities and medical schools is integral to service learning (Meili et al. 2011). Consequently, service learning fosters the application of the quality of altruism that medical students initially have when starting medical school (Meili et al. 2011). In addition, Meili et al. (2011) suggest that service learning activities allow for medical education around social accountability issues to extend beyond the theoretical classroom setting.

A socially responsive medical school responds to societal health needs by engaging students in longitudinal community-based activities (Boelen et al. 2012). Social accountability goes one step further by emphasizing that a medical school's focus on the priority health needs of a society should be obligatory and that educational institutions should use an evidence-based approach to addressing those needs (Boelen & Woollard 2011; Boelen et al. 2012; Woollard & Boelen 2012). The process of becoming socially accountable requires that medical schools collaborate with political and health service organizations and community stakeholders to meet priority health needs (Boelen & Woollard 2011; Boelen et al. 2012; Woollard & Boelen 2012). Addressing priority health needs of society includes incorporating the social determinants of health and the health needs of marginalized populations into medical education (Dharamsi et al. 2011).

Providing medical students with opportunities to interact with surrounding communities about their lived experiences pertaining to the social determinants of health is one means for attaining a better understanding of the priority health needs of a community. Hence, we are sharing twelve tips to help medical educators and train-

ees facilitate a Photovoice project as a service learning experience.

Tip 1

Define project objectives and the approach to community engagement

The first step includes identifying students who are interested in working with community members. This can be accomplished by connecting with various student interest groups with a focus on community health and broadly inviting medical students to participate in the project. The guidance of mentors with established community connections should also be sought out (Martinez et al. 2014). Determining clear objectives and deciding how the group will function is important.

Although our student-led initiative was conducted on a voluntary basis and was not part of the formal medical curriculum, we did have support from faculty who provided us with advice about how we could engage the community and contact information for community leaders. From there, the group of interested students developed objectives and collaboratively identified values that would inform our approach. These values included working with community members with lived experiences related to the social determinants of health and employing a collaborative approach whereby participants were treated as experts in their own lived experience. Our objectives included community capacity building through advocacy and providing opportunities for participants to share their perspectives on critical issues that affected their community. Consequently, we decided that Photovoice was the most appropriate participatory action approach to learn about the perspectives of participants with lived experiences (Minkler 2000). Questions about the purpose and potential benefits and risks for medical students, participants, and communities were discussed.

Tip 2

Identify a population of interest to medical students

Research suggests that early community contact has a profoundly positive impact on the educational development and experiences of medical students (Wilkinson et al. 2002). From a practical perspective, identifying a population for medical student engagement must be a strategic and well-planned initiative. There are many factors to consider such as medical student interest, community receptiveness, cultural sensitivity and safety for students and community members (Tindana et al. 2007).

As a group, we had a couple meetings among medical students that lasted approximately an hour to establish common interests. Through open discussions about our strengths and weaknesses, we decided to work with inner city youth. Furthermore, our rationale for working with youth centered around medical curriculum gaps and a lack of attention on youth perspectives about their community's health and well-being.

Tip 3

Identify community partners for the Photovoice project

One of the most important steps in a participatory action project is the selection of a community partner. Collaborating with an established organization helps to facilitate connections with gatekeepers and stakeholders in the community (Ebi & Semenza 2008). Some factors to consider when selecting a community partner are size of the organization, location, duration of the project, scheduling, and leadership of the organization.

In our experience, being transparent and flexible with our expectations of community partners was helpful. Once we identified potential community organizations, we reached out to Executive Directors to establish a working meeting with community organization team leads. The purpose of these meetings was to introduce the students involved and their initial project idea to the directors, collaboratively address logistical factors surrounding Photovoice if groups were interested in exploring the project further and supporting this type of community partnership. Successful collaboration entails employing an inclusive and mutually respectful relationship with the community organization such that common goals and visions can be attained through shared decision making (Tindana et al. 2007). We achieved this by inviting our community partners, especially youth leaders and coordinators, to offer frequent feedback and advice on the planning and execution of our project.

Tip 4

Employ a participatory action approach to facilitate discussions around lived experience

Participatory action can be used as a tool to learn about the way in which health disparities are experienced by communities, perceptions of those experiencing disparities and how to address disparities to derive a more equitable health care system (Olshansky et al. 2005). Participatory action approaches employ a cyclical process of data collection, critical reflection, and action in efforts to address health inequities (Minkler 2000; Baum et al. 2006). Inherent to the nature of critical reflection is learning about the history, culture and local context affecting the community (Baum et al. 2006). Emphasis is placed on democratic participation such that community health needs of participants, which may not be aligned with those determined by "experts," can be elucidated (Minkler 2000; Olshansky et al. 2005). Moreover, participatory action is aimed at linking critical reflection to action on issues prioritized by communities rather than "experts" (Minkler 2000). In turn, action is facilitated by building on community strengths and collective problem-solving capacity (Minkler 2000).

Participatory action has been employed to understand a variety of health-related issues including resettlement and health needs of refugees, end of life issues experienced by racialized individuals, and smoking behaviors among pregnant teenagers (Olshansky et al. 2005). In addition, participatory action projects have also been used to foster

discussions around building healthy communities in a variety of geographical contexts from urban metropolitan communities to small rural communities (Minkler 2000). Hence, this approach serves as a versatile and practical advocacy tool that can help medical students learn about social determinants of health.

As part of our project, youth participated by sharing perspectives on issues that directly affected their community. We chose to use Photovoice as a participatory action approach. Photovoice is consistent with the principles of participatory action as Loignon et al. (2014) explain that Photovoice can encourage participants to critically think about their lived experience and share their reflections with others. We worked with youth to facilitate the presentation of their perspectives and ideas for solutions with the broader community including key stakeholders. Our aim was to ensure that this project served as a platform for youths' voices on critical issues to be heard.

Tip 5

Engage in critical dialogue and storytelling with participants about issues relevant to their context

Emphasis has been placed on fostering public health leadership and advocacy skills amongst medical students (To & Sharma 2015). To build on these skills, medical students must become aware of the issues that affect their patients and communities. Freire (2009) suggests that leaders, instead of bringing messages of "salvation" to people, ought to learn and become aware of individuals' objective situation through dialogue. Not engaging in critical dialogue could result in a failure to appreciate the objective situations people experience (Freire 2009). Consequently, critical dialog possesses the potential for transforming and humanizing the world (Freire 2009).

Working from this philosophy to successfully engage in diverse and cultural issues, individuals must first become aware of their own assumptions and biases and be open to understanding participants' worldviews, appreciating the diverse context by which those views have formed (Jaladin 2011). One way of gathering this worldview is through storytelling and narratives. Storytelling is an essential element of critical dialog (Wong & Poon 2013). It is through this process that individuals can openly voice their concerns, unite with others who have similar concerns, and share power towards initiating change. This process also develops an emotional relationship between the storyteller and listeners. While stories and narratives do not represent absolute truth, they do reflect health and social realities within the individual and community context (Wong & Poon 2013; Hurwitz & Charon 2013). Thus, critical narrative analysis allows participants to bring to light the social realities of their choosing, which are often unheard or misunderstood, in order to reinforce a sense of control, cohesiveness and power (Wong & Poon 2013). It is also important to ensure that participants share their perspectives in a manner they deem appropriate (Wong & Poon 2013). Drew et al. (2010) state that Photovoice is one medium that can be used for visual storytelling. In our project, youth were able to capture events through photographs and expand on the impact of those events on the community through storytelling.

Tip 6

Utilize Photovoice as a medium through which discussions around lived experiences can be facilitated

Photovoice was originally developed as a public health research tool (Schuch et al. 2014). This medium has been utilized in various capacities including understanding and addressing the effects of the social determinants of health, environmental health, and health literacy on project participants from diverse communities (Adekeye et al. 2014; Madrigal et al. 2014; Schuch et al. 2014).

Photovoice is especially useful in providing a voice to marginalized individuals with low socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency and who generally do not have opportunities to provide their critical perspectives on issues that affect them (Adekeye et al. 2014; Schuch et al. 2014).

In Photovoice, participants are engaged in dialog about issues contextually relevant to their community. Participants subsequently capture these issues through photography and provide narratives to accompany the images (Adekeye et al. 2014). Through photos and corresponding narratives, participants are able to voice their community's needs and concerns to policymakers and the broader public (Adekeye et al. 2014). The photographs and accompanying narratives consequently serve as a starting point for grassroots and community-based social action (Adekeye et al. 2014).

From our experience, we found Photovoice to be a simple way for medical students to become aware of concrete issues within the community that affected participants. Not only did we see how issues affected the youth, but together with the participants, we were also able to view those issues within a broader context of the social determinants of health. Overall, the youth benefited from this project as it provided them with a platform to highlight strengths and concerns they had about their community.

Tip 7

Secure resources for the project

Medical schools should consider providing mini grants for service learning activities that medical students undertake. McNeal and Buckner (2012) suggested that once a grant is established, request for proposals should be solicited and evaluated on criteria such as community needs, learning objectives and plans for implementing the project.

Service learning activities, such as Photovoice, can be resource-intensive, as there can be costs related to purchasing cameras and developing photographs. In some Photovoice projects, participants can opt to use their own digital cameras or cellphones. However, for many marginalized or low-income populations, this could be a barrier to participation. For our project, we opted to purchase disposable cameras and develop photos for all participants. From the beginning, providing all necessary project materials was a priority for promoting inclusivity. Another cost that had to be considered was food during meetings with participants. The medical students involved in this project found that bringing people together around food helped to build a sense of community and also encouraged participation.

We applied for grants offered by our provincial public interest research group and the medical students' society at our institution.

Tip 8

Build rapport and introduce participants to the Photovoice process

Consistent with a participatory approach, it is vital that participants understand and agree with the project goals and understand how their photographs may be used (Wang & Burris 1997). Participants have a key role in determining how their photos are used and have the right to remove their photographs from the project at any time (Palibroda et al. 2009). Participants also need to be comfortable using a camera so that they can feel confident in using images to represent their experiences. Camera basics, such as turning it on and off, adjusting basic settings, and using flash, can be explained. Photography techniques, such as lighting, balance, contrast, composition, and capturing the viewer's attention, can also be reviewed. This can help participants to more confidently engage in self-expression, be creative with their photographs, and feel proud about what they produce for the project (Palibroda et al. 2009). Ethical considerations of taking photos should be discussed (Palibroda et al. 2009). For example, participants should be discouraged from taking photographs of people unless the purpose of the project has been explained and permission has been obtained (Wang & Burris 1997).

For our Photovoice experience, we built rapport with youth participants at the first session through providing a warm welcome and introductions between the participants and ourselves and facilitating a light "icebreaker" activity. We explained the project goals and the Photovoice process and made sure participants had ample time for questions and conversation related to the project. We also worked with the youth to ensure that they were familiar with the camera itself and understood what makes a better or more powerful photograph. After photographs were taken, we met with the youth to discuss their photographs and record the text narratives behind their photographs. After this process, facilitators edited the narratives for grammar and linked each one to its specific photograph for the community showcase.

Tip 9

Once participants' narratives have been developed, partner with them to showcase their lived experiences to the wider community

A collaborative approach between facilitators and participants with respect to selecting which narratives to present must be used. Showcasing the community's narrative enables the exchange of ideas, resources and approaches to possibly improving the quality of life for the participants (Wang et al. 1998). The opportunity to exchange ideas through showcasing narratives can also trigger community-based innovation (Wang et al. 1998). Policy makers and community stakeholders also benefit from the showcase as

it allows them to understand the perspective of local community members (Wang et al. 1998).

There are many ways to present the narratives developed via Photovoice including a project website, a photo-book and narratives or a community showcase. Through consulting with the participants and youth coordinators, we mutually agreed that a community showcase was the most appropriate presentation platform.

Tip 10

Plan a Photovoice community showcase at a local and accessible venue

Photovoice can be an effective tool to unify members of a community, highlight concerns, and stimulate discussion aimed at social change (Wang et al. 1998). Furthermore, a public event like an open viewing allows for mass exposure to photos of critical community issues (Wang & Burris 1997). Consequently, we wanted to select a space that was in the heart of the community and was accessible to community members and policymakers. We met several times for approximately an hour to discuss and plan a showcase at a local venue. We explored different locations that could host the event including a restaurant, a small theater, and a public library. We eventually decided in conjunction with community members that the public library was best suited for the showcase. In our experience, presenting the youths' work in a public venue provided a platform for politicians, community leaders, parents and members of the public to appreciate the insights that participants had to offer. We ensured that the public showcase was balanced by displaying both strengths and disparities of the community.

Tip 11

Advocate with participants for change through the media and other outlets

Service learning experiences like Photovoice can provide an opportunity for medical students to engage in health advocacy with their communities (To & Sharma 2015). Starting a conversation with the community brings with it possible attention from media and other outlets and therefore, the responsibility of being available and active in promoting change. Keeping open lines of communication, being prudent in responses, and supporting community members through the process can help maintain a positive relationship with the community. Moreover, participants who shared their lived experiences engage in advocacy by bringing attention to important issues for the public. However, one must be mindful of the potential for the distortion of the message when working with the media and other outlets.

One way for students to engage in conversations with the media is to determine what the values and goals of the participants are and if they align with media involvement. In our Photovoice project, we offered a number of options to our participants and asked which they would like to be involved with. By involving youth from the early stages of the project, they could decide if and how they would participate. Furthermore, they could shape the project in a way

they wished and how their photos would be shared with the public. Through a public showcase which captured the interest of the media and the local community, the youth were able to share their narratives and highlight strengths of their community like the importance of public transportation. They also shared areas for change in their community such as improved access to safe and clean parks.

Tip 12

Critically reflect on the process

After conducting the Photovoice project, we had a chance to critically reflect on the experience through discussion and reflective writing. Through looking back on this experience, we recognize that the collaboration of many individuals and stakeholders was needed to coordinate a successful Photovoice project. There were moments when plans did not proceed as expected. In our experience, conflicting schedules made it difficult to meet at times. Although our group worked well together, differing opinions among students and project stakeholders could lead to challenges in moving forward. It is important to ensure that the project respectfully includes community members and represents their perspectives from beginning to end.

Successfully completing a community engagement project requires students to approach the process with openness and flexibility, remembering the objectives they are trying to achieve, while also being open to how the project may evolve as it progresses. Patience with the process will ensure that the project can be completed and will make it a more enjoyable experience.

Conclusion

Providing medical students with opportunities to engage communities through a participatory action lens may be one way for medical schools to foster social responsiveness and social accountability. Such an approach not only serves as a method for medical students to learn about social determinants of health through a lived experience perspective, but also has the capacity for building advocacy and community collaboration skills. Through providing a voice to marginalized populations using a Photovoice approach, medical students learn how to advocate with their communities and work towards social change.

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Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

Notes on contributors

Deep Jaiswal, Matthew J. To, Heather Hunter, Ciaran Lane, Cinera States, Brittany Cameron, Suzanne Kathleen Clarke, and Catherine Cox

are medical students at Dalhousie University.

Anna MacLeod is an Associate Professor and the Director of Education Research in the Division of Medical Education at Dalhousie University

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