



Re-visioning Bulletin Boards: A Participatory Approach to Assessing Student Learning and Experience

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BULLETIN BOARDS ARE UBIQUITOUS in residence halls and may not always capture students' attention, but when they do, they have the potential to engage students in meaningful learning experiences. Our study explores how arts-based methodologies can be used in student affairs and higher education research to expand possibilities for practitioners to understand what students want to voice and to assess student learning directly. We worked with four student participants to set up a photovoice project in tandem with a university's residential curriculum. In this article, we share findings from the photovoice project and apply a learning framework to analyze the deep learning that residents experienced. Findings reflect shared identities of the student-participants, the style of articulation they chose to voice their experience, and demonstrations of deep learning. This article explores how photovoice methodology's participatory, artistic approach shifted power from researcher to participant, disrupted the normative gaze of higher education professionals, and legitimized students' affective experience, helping them navigate institutional identity to maximize the intelligibility of their voices. Student-participants in this study utilized photovoice to communicate their experience and demonstrate their learning to residence life staff in ways that exceed traditional data collection and assessment methods.

Bulletin boards in residence halls lurk within the architecture, offering educational interaction with residents who pause to engage with them. Yet in the fast-paced life of a 21st-century college student, bulletin boards may not always capture the attention of young adults whose eyes dart from one screen to another. When they do, these boards mobilize a powerful mode of communication with residents because of their text-and-image combination and potential to highlight relevant topics. These features enable a compelling visual experience as well as an opportunity to make learning connections outside students' curricular experience. Moreover, we argue that bulletin boards can intensify student relationships when they share the information they learn with one another and when they recognize the material labor involved, often done by their resident advisor. This study explores how higher education professionals might better understand students' experience of bulletin boards and how they contribute to student learning.

Student affairs professionals may not be able to fully understand how students learn from and experience bulletin boards because conventional forms of eliciting student voice, such as streamlined survey instruments and individual or small-group interviews (Henning & Roberts, 2016; St. Pierre, 2011), are limited. Conventional approaches tend to generate a reductive feedback loop that seeks to capture and

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contain the student voice but limits the possibilities of student expression and forecloses discussion (Young & Jerome, 2020). Conventional methods also construct the student voice in a way that restricts its possibilities for full expression (Carr, 2009) and falsely presume that the research process can capture an authentic representation of experience (Mazzei, 2016). Also, students may lack fluency in the language of policy, rendering them unable to express themselves even when they are purportedly invited to speak (Higgins, 2016; Shankar, 2016).

Meanwhile, assessment of student learning is frequently limited to indirect forms when students are only able to provide a perception of their learning but do not demonstrate new skills or knowledge (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Indirect methods are less effective than direct methods due to their reliance on perception and their focus on measures “tangentially related to the learning” (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 68). There is no way to validate a student’s perception, and evaluators must make assumptions about how to interpret indirect reports. Furthermore, surveys typically reflect this conventional assessment approach by using a Likert scale to assign numbers to a “logical sequence of words” (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 67). Thus, the dynamic and personal experience of learning becomes measured by an exercise of counting, even when qualitative methods are used (St. Pierre, 2011). Drawing conclusions from these numerical, perception-based questions involves several assumptions on the part of both the surveyor and surveyed.

Our study explores how arts-based methodologies can be used in student affairs and higher education research to expand possibilities for practitioners to understand what students want to voice and to assess student learning directly. Bulletin boards are a ripe subject because they are used in residence halls all over the country and are a common tool for residence life departments. Bulletin boards require labor to conceptualize and construct, but they have the potential to engage students in meaningful learning experiences. We worked with four student-participants at The University of Texas at Austin, a large, predominately White institution, to set up a photovoice project (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997) in tandem with the school’s residential curriculum. Photovoice is “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). Through its participatory design, photovoice amplifies the lived experiences of marginalized people, the relations between people in shared spaces, and the community as a whole (Latz, 2017, p. 36). Photovoice accesses “subjugated knowledge” (Ingrey, 2013, p. 174), highlighting experiences otherwise ignored by standard research practices. Through interfacing with policymakers, participants express “voices that ordinarily would not be heard and broadcast them into the halls of decision-making power” (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 182). Given the challenges of representing student experience using conventional methods, we utilized a qualitative, participatory methodology to generate rich, multimodal data and provide students an opportunity to leverage agency in constructing their voice.

We applied a learning framework to analyze the deep learning that residents experienced by completing this study. Studies have shown that students learn more deeply when they engage in the material (Chi & Wylie, 2014; Corno & Mandinach, 1983; King, 1993; Tharayil et al., 2018). We utilize the ICAP framework (Chi & Wiley, 2014) to categorize the depth of learning into four levels—passive, active, constructive, and interactive—in order to demonstrate the depth of a learning activity. These categories build on each other. At the first level is *passive* learning, or simply taking information without connecting it to any other knowledge; it is the least involved category. Next is *active* learning, which involves manipulating the information in some way, such as by taking notes. The next level is *constructive*, which is marked by students creating knowledge from the information, such as coming up with a new idea or connecting to knowledge they already possess. The most involved category is *interactive*, where students discuss the information with someone else, and they create knowledge together.

Promoting and assessing learning is increasingly relevant in residential contexts. Many schools have begun to implement a residential curriculum, which includes identifying learning goals, specific learning outcomes for each goal, and a set of coordinated educational strategies for achieving those outcomes (Kerr et al., 2020). One strategy, or pedagogical tool, is to populate bulletin boards with specific content that aligns with curricular aims to promote learning among residents. Bulletin boards represent an indirect form of education, but they can also serve as an interactive tool for residential learners (Kerr et al., 2017). UT-Austin is one example of a school that uses bulletin boards as part of its residential curriculum, and our study focused on two of the three departmental learning goals, outlined below:

Goal 1—Community engagement

Residents will engage in community and will be able to

- *identify within a community*
- *interact and communicate with others effectively*
- *develop positive relationships and*
- *participate in civic life.*

Goal 2—Cultural competency

Residents will be able to demonstrate cultural competency and will be able to

- *articulate their own identities*
- *understand and express personal values and viewpoints*
- *bridge differences and commonalities*
- *affirm and celebrate others and*
- *advocate for diversity, inclusion, and equity.*

In order to explore the nuances of students' expressions of learning offered through photovoice, we also examined participants' *auteurship*, or strategic artistic decisions (Shankar, 2016). UT-Austin offers a particularly interesting case of bulletin board learning because resident assistants are encouraged to be creative in designing unique displays according to topics within the residential curriculum. Thus, our participants had more choices about where to direct their visual attention than they would if

all the bulletin boards in this study were uniform. Student-participants utilized photovoice to communicate their experience and demonstrate their learning to residence life staff in ways that exceed traditional data collection and assessment methods. Photovoice is particularly valuable for education research focused on residence life because it helps student affairs professionals understand how students inhabit and navigate residential spaces (Samura et al., 2021). We built on Samura and colleagues' (2021) exploration of student belonging in residence halls, which leveraged photovoice methodology to demonstrate the interrelationship of spatial experience and student identity. Not only do residence halls generate intimate and meaningful spaces, but students engaging in photovoice research find new modes of reflecting on and expressing the developmental impact of their residential experience. This article explores how the methodology's participatory, artistic approach shifted power from researcher to participant (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), disrupted the normative gaze of higher education professionals (Hemy & Meshulam, 2020), legitimized students' affective experience (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Edwards, 2015), and aided them in navigating institutional identity to maximize the expression of their voice (Carr, 2009).

The research questions guiding the study focused on how the project enabled students to demonstrate learning from bulletin boards and what artistic decisions were made by student photographers in their presentation to residence life leaders. The ICAP framework offers a way to conceptualize interactive bulletin board learning, and photovoice methodology provides a more direct way to demonstrate that learning than do traditional assessment methods. This combination can offer residence life and other student affairs professionals an effective framework for learning assessment.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

This study uses photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997) as an arts-based alternative to traditional forms of eliciting student feedback. Photovoice deploys a three-pronged conceptual framework that draws on Freirean theory to empower participants, feminist standpoint theory to affirm the knowledge of participants, and arts-based research to open the possibilities for multimodal communication (Latz, 2017). Photovoice projects develop critical consciousness, empower the voice of marginalized participants, and offer non-linguistic modes of expression. Photovoice is an innovative research approach because of its combination of political action, participatory involvement, and image-based representation. In a photovoice project, individuals take a number of photographs in response to a prompt. Then the group discusses their photographs, identifying themes in a shared exercise. In the third phase, participants directly interface with the policymakers through an exhibition, showing and describing selected photographs as a group.

As a form of participatory action research (PAR), photovoice places ethics at the forefront and is more labor intensive than many approaches to research. The goal of this type of research is to shift power from researcher to participant (Kemmis &

... arts-based methodologies can be used in student affairs and higher education research to expand possibilities for practitioners to understand what students want to voice and to assess student learning directly. Bulletin boards are a ripe subject because they are used in residence halls all over the country and are a common tool for residence life departments.

McTaggart, 2005). To support participants as drivers of the research project, researchers must facilitate the group elicitation process without prescribing themes and must seek to be self-reflexive (Higgins, 2016). Photovoice researchers are educators who seek to facilitate participants' increased ability to critically assess problems and communicate needs to policymakers (Teti et al., 2013). Because the work requires a great deal of participants' time and energy, however, they should also be compensated beyond the learning they take from the project. Overall, photovoice research must be carefully planned and resourced so as to support participant agency, respect participant labor, and ensure project efficacy.

We were interested in how students engaged with educational bulletin boards posted in their residence halls. Photovoice served in this case as an alternative form of assessing student learning, since participating in the project offered students the chance to reflect on what and how they learn from these displays. The findings from the study are briefly contrasted with those secured by the conventional research method—quantitative questions on a large survey—to show how our approach facilitated personalized expression and direct assessment. Bulletin boards function as architecture, revealing themselves to students in complex spatial environments, and photovoice may help residence life leaders understand how students see and experience these sources of information. The opportunity to document their experience, make meaning together as a group, and present to the senior leadership in residence life provides student-participants an opportunity to construct their own voice. As researchers, our goal is to amplify their voice by ensuring that it is “heard” . . . [in] the halls of decision-making power” (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 182) and to support an overall empowering experience for student-participants. Through this project we sought to empower students and to understand how they navigate symbolic systems through the artistic presentation of their experience with the bulletin boards in their residence hall.

Research Setting

This project utilized photovoice methodology as an assessment tool for student engagement with the bulletin boards in a residence hall. The researchers are both White, cisgender people who work in residence life at UT-Austin. We decided to recruit students from the largest residence hall on campus, with the study open to any interested participants. The study was carried out during April 2022, and students interacted with bulletin boards currently on display that month. These boards represented the following five topics: Arab-American heritage, gender pronouns, financial wellness, environmental sustainability, and preparation for final exams.

Through snowball sampling, four students from the residence hall's living-learning community (LLC) for first-generation college students volunteered, and all four completed the study. All four students were in their first year of postsecondary education, and all four identified as cisgender, Latino men. Students were compensated for their time with two meals and \$25 toward on-campus dining. The student-participants were asked to document how they experienced the bulletin boards, with creative license to generate photographs or videos that reflected their viewpoint. Then they were guided through a semi-structured group elicitation interview that allowed them to co-construct meaning for the images, their perception of the bulletin boards, and the possibilities for a presentation to leaders. Finally, students presented selected photographs to the residence life leadership team one week after the group interview. Speaking directly to senior staff, students described their experience using their own words and images, offering suggestions for changes to future displays.

Research Questions

In order to analyze the effectiveness of photovoice as a means for representing student experience and to understand how it allows students to demonstrate learning from bulletin boards in residence halls, we followed these guiding questions:

1. *How do students demonstrate learning from educational bulletin boards in residence halls using photovoice?*
2. *What artistic techniques do students engage in through photovoice to generate forms of expression that differ from conventional qualitative methods?*

Data Sources

Data sources for this project are threefold, emerging from the group interview, group presentation, and the photographs themselves. During the group interview, data emerged from observations of how participants assigned linguistic meaning to their photography, how they identified collective identities and policy interests, and how they crafted a strategy for voicing these concerns in the final exhibition phase. More data emerged from our observation of the presentation, in which students were able to show and tell directors in residence life why they selected certain photos and what policies they hoped to change. Finally, a third data source is the photographs themselves, although data collection in photovoice research typically does not refer to participant photographs (Latz, 2017). Because one of our research questions assesses artistic technique, we also treat the images that participants constructed as data. These images can be analyzed in tandem with the language students use to assign captions, meanings, and policy suggestions to the images they produce.

Data Analysis

We used all three sources of data to respond to each of the research questions. The group interview and student presentations were transcribed and coded, following themes identified by the student-participants during the interview (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). As researchers, we used the themes that students identified to develop this written project. We also used the ICAP framework (Chi & Wylie, 2014) to analyze

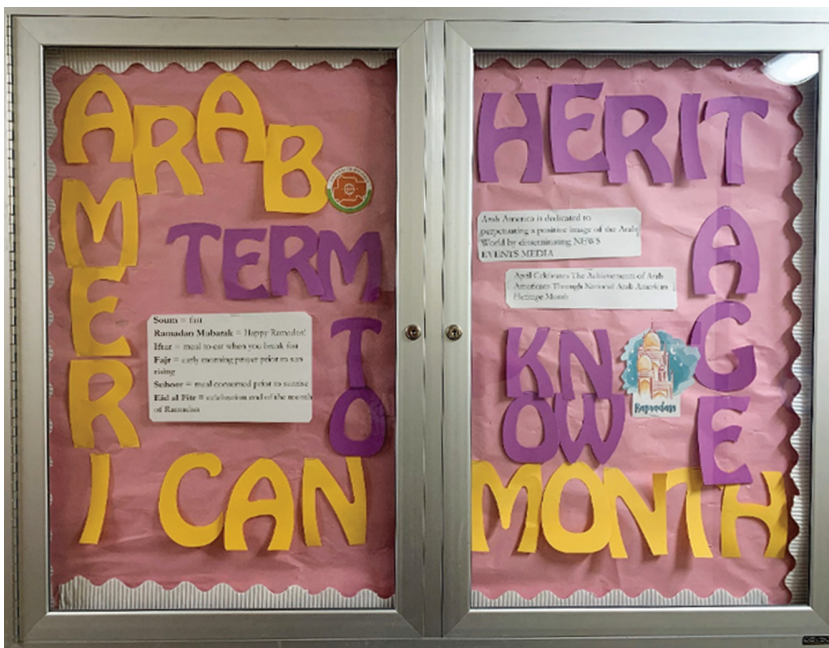
the depth of learning and to compare learning demonstrated in this study against the results of the survey.

RESEARCH PROCESS

In this photovoice project, three students chose to work together and capture images of all the bulletin boards in the entire residence hall, while a fourth created a comic strip portraying his interaction with one particular bulletin board. From the three students who worked together, Juan contributed 10 photos, Hector submitted eight photos, and Christian captured six photos.¹ Each student featured bulletin boards covering at least four topics, which allowed the group to discuss which topics stood out to them as they completed the activity. By capturing images of all the bulletin boards in the entire residence hall, the trio juxtaposed the full collection of bulletin boards with the limited selection typically experienced by a student. In the interview and presentation, they discussed the range of bulletin board topics, variation in exposure due to bulletin board placement, and compelling or off-putting design elements. Figure 1 shows an image the group highlighted as an interesting topic and well-designed board.

FIGURE 1

Bulletin Board Photo by Christian

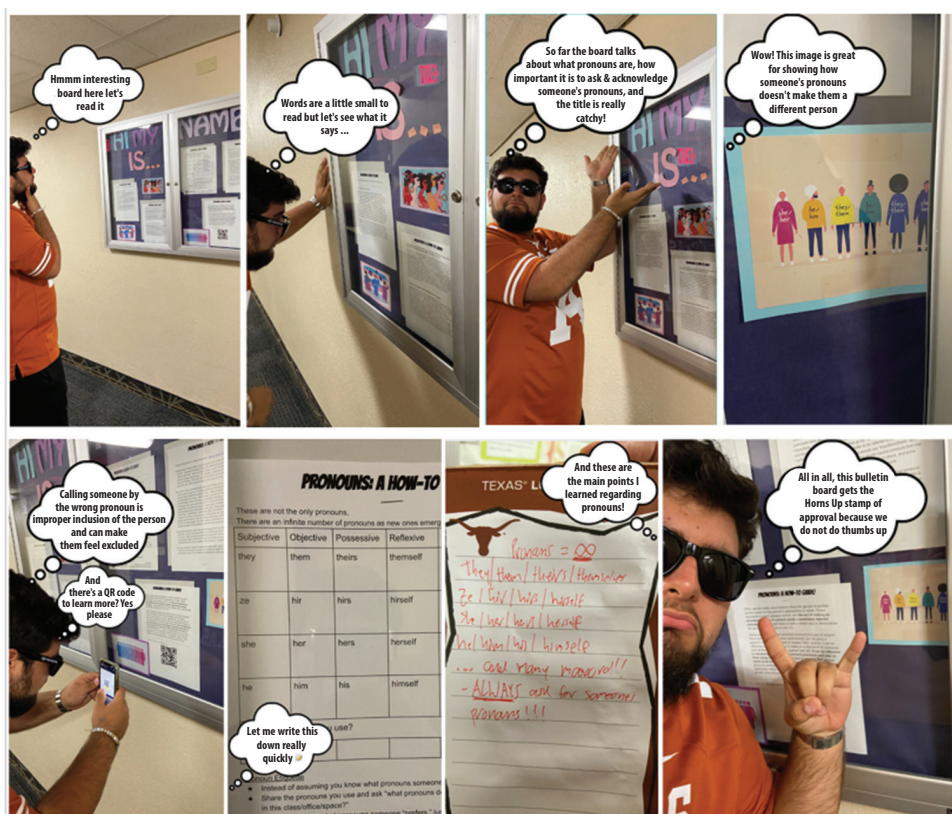


¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this article. This study received IRB approval, and participant consent was given to share photographs and quotations.

The fourth student, Steven, creatively depicted a first-hand student experience by utilizing a comic strip format with captions and staged photos. He selected a bulletin board that explains gender pronouns and utilized comic-style thought bubbles to portray a sequence of moments that lead to meaningful learning from the bulletin board. Steven worked with an unnamed collaborator who served as his photographer, as Steven directed the shots and appeared in several frames. Figure 2 shows the full collection of eight labeled images.

FIGURE 2

Bulletin Board Photos by Steven



Through its participatory design, photovoice amplifies the lived experiences of marginalized people, the relations between people in shared spaces, and the community as a whole.

Participants focused their analysis on the design of the bulletin boards, the topics that most interested them, and the way their attention was directed during and outside of the photovoice study. Student-participants shared their opinions alongside their photographs and made recommendations to senior leaders according to these three thematic areas. In highlighting the importance of design elements, students pointed to variation across the boards in terms of font size and color, quantity of information, and portals to further information. The most effective bulletin boards offered tangible opportunities to learn by providing some basic information but also included a QR code to give the observer the option to learn more. However, students quickly moved past boards that included small fonts and too much information.

Student-participants also indicated that particular topics were more interesting than others and thus more likely to facilitate learning. From the five topical areas covered by the full collection of bulletin boards, those focused on Arab-American heritage and gender pronouns proved significantly more interesting to students than did financial wellness, environmental sustainability, and preparation for final exams. In the group interview, students described how their own cultural identities and pre-college experiences led them to be particularly interested in intercultural learning.

Participant analysis of bulletin board design and content led to discussion of the boards' ability to capture students' attention. Participants thoughtfully considered how the activity increased their desire to pay attention to what they otherwise may have ignored, how the spatial experience of residents dictates which boards are seen and in what conditions they are encountered, and how certain boards with compelling design and content were more likely to earn a bypasser's attention.

FINDINGS

Our study resulted in findings that reflect demonstrations of deep learning, shared identities of the student-participants, and the style of articulation they chose to voice their experience. The ICAP framework and attentiveness to students as *auteurs* helped conceptualize the interactive, personalized learning process that took place. In this section, we share findings that reflect the themes of student learning, student identity, and student agency.

Deep Learning

This section will review various examples of student learning that took place in the study. Some of the observations shared by student-participants focused on information they gleaned instantly from the bulletin boards. In addition to learning vocabulary or basic facts, students highlighted the importance of design elements, pointing to variation across the bulletin boards in terms of font size and color, quantity of information, and portals to further information. However, they quickly moved past boards that included small fonts and too much information. They also reflected on how the photovoice activity itself increased their desire to pay attention to bulletin boards, which they otherwise may not have noticed.

Photovoice is particularly valuable for education research focused on residence life because it helps student affairs professionals understand how students inhabit and navigate residential spaces.

The most effective bulletin boards offered tangible opportunities to learn by providing some basic information but also included a QR code to give the observer the option to learn more. Justin noted that some boards offered accessible learning opportunities through their combination of basic information and a QR portal: “We noticed that there’s a lot of usage of QR codes, which can sometimes not be very useful, because not everyone’s gonna go up and scan.” Hector added,

Some of the boards, they’re packed to the brim with information. And so, if you’re just walking by, it’s kind of overwhelming. So with the QR codes, you can combine some paragraphs, and then if you want to learn more, here’s tools to do so.

Some elements of the bulletin boards captured the attention of the student-participants and incited them to share what they learned with others. They argued that the most captivating forms of image-text expression were those that created a narrative with a sense of progression. Meanwhile, references to popular culture often led to student-participants paying closer attention and even noticing bodily reactions to the boards. Like Hector, Steven emphasized the efficacy of popular culture references on bulletin boards when he asserted that he recognized the title (“Hi, my name is . . .”) as a “reference to Eminem,” referring to a popular song by the rapper. Justin observed, “Most of us are pretty used to seeing memes,” adding that they incite an “instant dose of dopamine. And we’re like, ‘Oh, this is funny. But let’s go to the next one’ . . . It takes advantage of that instinct.” Student-participants shared what they learned with others, especially when the bulletin boards made use of memes. Christian pointed out, “Essentially, when you tell your friends, that’s like sharing on social media. You notice it creates more energy around it.”

By completing this participatory study, students engaged in deeper learning than they otherwise may have. They also demonstrated learning at various levels described by the ICAP framework (Chi & Wylie, 2014). This section deploys the ICAP framework—in which the depth of learning progresses from passive to active to constructive to interactive levels—to describe examples of various types of student learning that took place.

Bulletin boards often appear as passive learning activities and are designed as entry points into a topic, where students can gain some introductory knowledge and, if they choose, then explore the topic more deeply. Steven described the passive learning that can occur when he noted that one board “even teaches you some vocabulary there, which I find really interesting.” Christian echoed the point: “And when you leave knowing a little bit of vocabulary, you remember it’s there to teach you something.” Hector pointed out that although the boards are designed to engage passive learning, they can still be interesting. Hector’s statement, “I thought this was really interesting, because it’s kind of funny, but like, it’s really informative,” was an example of baseline bulletin board learning—if the information is presented in a compelling way, it may be absorbed by passersby without much extra effort on the part of the observer.

Student-participants also noted moments when they moved from passive learning strategies to active ones. For example, Hector states, “And it also uses the QR codes if you want to learn more, and I actually scanned it, and it goes to the epa.gov website. So like, it uses credible sources, not just a random opinion article.” Hector’s decision to follow the link was an active learning move, and his report on the credibility of the sources demonstrated critical thinking. Meanwhile, Justin stated that he chose mainly to photograph certain bulletin board topics in this activity: “I noticed that [most boards covered] either personal finance or exams. I didn’t [photograph] all the personal finance ones.” This example parallels Chi and Wylie’s (2014) active learning example of highlighting notes while reading, because the student chooses what to emphasize from the given information. Overall, the project encouraged active learning as described by Chi and Wylie by asking students to photograph and highlight certain bulletin boards, which is akin to “taking verbatim notes” or “pausing” a video tape (2014, p. 221).

The photovoice project itself also helped the students move into deeper learning strategies. For example, the participant-led group interview that characterizes photovoice encouraged students to reflect out-loud, explain concepts, and take notes “in one’s own words” (Chi & Wylie, 2014, p. 221). Steven demonstrated how he shifted into constructive learning when he generated comics from his photos by describing his process in this way: “Okay, let me just put a couple of words that summarize everything in a little text bubble.” By creating the comic strip to represent a student’s engagement with a bulletin board, Steven moved beyond “receiving” (passive) and “manipulating” (active) to “generating” (constructive) new knowledge, which deepened his own learning (Chi & Wylie, 2014, p. 221).

During the meeting with the residence life leadership team, the students progressed to the interactive stage of learning, which is characterized by dialogue in which “both partners make substantive contributions” (Chi & Wylie, 2014, p. 223). After students presented their photos, they engaged in a discussion with staff, who asked them to recommend changes to future bulletin boards; the spontaneous discussion that ensued allowed students to deepen their own learning through co-construction of new knowledge. Students thus engaged in “dialoguing,” engaging with staff in turn-taking to generate “new ideas that neither individual knew initially nor could generate alone” (Chi & Wylie, 2014, p. 223). In this presentation, students engaged in co-creating knowledge with members of the leadership team, who learned alongside the students.

Connecting to Identity

Student-participants spoke extensively about how they made sense of the bulletin boards through their own reflections on personal identities. They also highlighted their shared and unique experiences as cisgender Latino men who were first-generation students,

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especially in the group interview. Each of the four students described how their interest in particular bulletin board topics reflected their own cultural background.

Hector noted that he was drawn to the boards that focus on cultural heritage such as the one announcing Arab-American heritage month because, in his predominately Mexican-American hometown in Texas, “We’re so culture-driven. . . . That’s why I’m so interested in the heritage, because I want to learn other people’s cultures, it’s such a big part of their lives.” He added the reflective observation that “We’re driven by [our culture] so much, even here. In college, we continue the same ideologies and beliefs.”

Christian built on Hector’s statement by connecting his background to an interest in learning about personal pronouns, articulating how his value of respecting others increased his desire to learn about the practice. Christian said he realized when he arrived at UT-Austin that students had a wide array of backgrounds and cited his “small town” upbringing as the reason he had not learned how people identify with personal pronouns. He said he focused most on that topic “because it’s one of those things that would be more helpful to know—it’s just a good first step to going out there and learning about someone else.”

Steven, whose comic strip creation focused entirely on a personal pronouns bulletin board, described learning about difference as a key element to a better understanding of society. He noted that in his small high school in Houston, “We weren’t really exposed to people having different pronouns, we had always just assumed everybody’s pronouns were like he/him or she/her.” Living in the first-gen LLC gave him the chance to meet and live with peers who used nonbinary pronouns, which he said “was good to learn, because I think this is more what reality is like than what I was exposed to before in high school. This is more like what the real world is.” Steven chose to depict how one bulletin board educated students about why personal pronouns matter and how they can be used, which helped him better understand their relevance and purpose. Like his peers, Steven demonstrated his own learning during his presentation by introducing himself using his preferred pronouns and then by displaying and vocalizing varieties of gender pronouns that he encountered through engagement with the board. Finally, Justin also described how his background informed his topical interests:

I grew up in a predominately White town and the only minorities were Hispanic people that I can remember. It is sometimes difficult to understand other cultures if you’re not always around them. And so I will always try to strive to learn more about that. And the same thing with pronouns—that wasn’t an emphasis in my education growing up, especially in high school.

Justin noted that although exam preparation and personal finance offered tangible benefits to first-generation college students, the participants were far more drawn to learning about other cultures.

Students’ reflections on how their own identities shaped their learning in the photovoice study spoke to the learning curriculum at UT-Austin and demonstrate the kind of direct learning assessment that conventional survey techniques cannot provide. Students in residence typically report their experiences of bulletin boards

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using Likert scales that ask for their perspective, rather than examples of their learning (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Most students neither agreed nor disagreed that they learned about self-management, community engagement, or cultural competency—the three curricular goals—from bulletin boards. Furthermore, student interpretations may vary according to demographic categories, survey fatigue, or which bulletin boards they most recently experienced and can recall. As stated at the outset of this article, indirect forms of assessment embed problematic assumptions and have no way to validate reported learning.

In contrast, the photovoice study provided students opportunities to share their perceptions of learning as well as to demonstrate what they had learned. For example, Hector named facts he learned about sustainability as well as his further research on the EPA website, which he accessed using the QR code provided on the bulletin board. Steven engaged in a form of direct assessment when he created and presented the comic strip, demonstrating his increased understanding of different gender pronouns and why it is important to honor others' preferences.

In the group interview and presentation to administrators, student-participants described working together with their peers to complete the project as well as interacting with other residents in the building along the way. They also argued that compelling bulletin boards can facilitate RA-resident relationships, which they recognized as an important element in being part of a residential community. They observed how certain bulletin boards facilitated social interaction by encouraging them to share the information with friends in a real-world interaction that is analogous to “sharing on social media” and “brings together a community.” Finally, by articulating what they learned about sustainability, Arab-American heritage, and personal pronouns, the student-participants demonstrated participation in civic life.

This photovoice project generated significant engagement with the department's cultural competency. The study findings demonstrate an alignment with the department's goals for community engagement and cultural competency goals with far more specificity and directness than did the indirect question asked on the department's annual survey, which asks students if they think bulletin boards in general helped them learn about those topics. Students in this study articulated their identities with reflective descriptions of their cultural background and status as first-generation students and demonstrated the ability to understand and express personal values in connection with those identities. They asserted a desire to bridge differences and to affirm others in their descriptions of how the boards presented information about Arab-American heritage and personal pronouns. Finally, by suggesting to the researcher and the leadership team that they found the cultural competency topics important and valuable, they advocated for diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Exhibiting Agency

In the third phase of the photovoice project, often referred to as an exhibition (Latz, 2017), student-participants delivered a presentation to nine staff on the residence life leadership team. All four students introduced themselves, spoke briefly about how they approached the project and what elements of bulletin boards they found compelling, and fielded questions from the interested audience. During this final phase, they demonstrated agency in the way they presented their ideas—showing and telling while they shared information about the images projected on the screen behind them—and by the way they responded to queries from residence life leaders. Responding to the questions from staff about how much the students noticed the bulletin boards before the project, where the best locations would be for future boards, and what ideas they would suggest for improving bulletin board design revealed a form of agency as students seized the opportunity to provide a form of feedback that transcends numbers and limited-text responses on surveys.

One key component of student agency was the humor they deployed. For example, after the staff introduced themselves and their director-level job titles, Steven began the introductions by quipping, “My name is Steven, and I’m not the director of anything but I’m an applied learning major.” Justin stated that he had not yet declared a major but was primarily interested in mechanical engineering and biology before adding, “I guess I’m the director of my dorm beds.” These comments elicited laughter from the room, and students were visibly encouraged by the response, as revealed by their posture, facial expressions, and ensuing frankness.

Following their introductions, the student-participants summarized the themes described earlier in this chapter. They articulated how particular design elements aided the bulletin boards’ effectiveness, how they were especially drawn to certain topics, and why these design and topical elements commanded increased attention to certain bulletin boards. Just as they did in the group interview, they demonstrated their learning directly by sharing some of the knowledge they gained through engagement with the most interesting boards. Finally, they responded to staff questions about prospective bulletin boards by describing residents’ spatio-temporal experiences in residence halls. For example, they described the regular experience of doing laundry in order to discuss a place that forces students to pause (“you’re already trapped in there”) and offers the chance to look around. Without interesting material on the walls of the laundry room, they noted, students pass the time by looking at their phones.

Steven’s presentation of his comic strip demonstrated agency through the use of humor, word choice, and metaphor. As we displayed his images, Steven read the thought bubble text out loud and verbally annotated the comic strip by describing his creative process. He noted his interest in the personal pronoun topic and his reaction to the bulletin board’s design. In describing an image that showed his “review” of the bulletin board, Steven said, “All in all, this bulletin board gets the Steven ‘horns up’ stamp, because we do not ‘thumbs up, thumbs down’ at UT.” Steven drew on institutional culture to gain rapport with the staff, who understood and approved of his humorous mascot-inspired review format. Finally, when staff asked why he had chosen

this method of sharing feedback, Steven used a metaphor to articulate the feeling of agency he had to express himself: “Well, when I was on the phone with [Author 1], he kind of said, get as creative as you want. So that kind of gave me, you know, the keys to the Lambo because I like to be creative.”

Steven’s utilization of a comic strip format and his verbal presentation demonstrate the potential richness of photovoice data and the ways creativity and participatory methods can enhance agency. The thought bubbles and captions allowed Steven to deliver his thoughts as language. He combined modalities of speech to generate a multimodal expression that could never be represented in a language-only interview or survey. Steven’s mobilization of a “longhorn” hand shape illustrates an observation from Carr (2009): Although institutions construct an institutional identity through which their subjects must speak, those subjects can inhabit the institutional identity to gain legitimacy. When they inhabit this identity, it makes their concerns clear to policy makers in ways they might not have recognized had they been expressed in a different register. Indeed, Steven’s comment was met with delight from residence life leaders, whose approval served as evidence of the effectiveness of Steven’s approach. Being positioned as an institutional subject yielded certain language available to Steven, and his ability to use that language granted him increased power.

Unlike the secondary representation often elicited through interviews, Steven’s comic strip and presentation allowed him to have more control over word choice, the structure of his argument, and how images can be used in tandem with words to generate a pluralized image-voice. The methodology used here uncovered themes that might have been obscured by more traditional techniques of eliciting feedback and allowed the students themselves to take up institutional identities and underscore the value of using the lens of community cultural wealth. This study demonstrates the value of using participatory arts-based methods to elicit student responses and create opportunities for them to be active agents in the process of providing feedback to policymakers.

One metaphor that demonstrated student agency emerged during the group presentation when Steven was asked why he took such a creative approach to the project. Steven stated in a phone conversation about the project that the first author had given him “the keys to the Lambo” by encouraging an out-of-the-box approach. This reference to a Lamborghini luxury car demonstrated the use of metaphor to import a domain of meaning from the student’s world into the student affairs setting, and it articulated the very act of shifting power from researcher to participant that characterizes the goal of participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

Furthermore, Steven’s metaphorical description of his approach reflects Hemy and Meshulam’s (2020) assertion that participatory projects using visual methods empower participants to disrupt and reverse the normative gaze. Not only did this project offer students the chance to describe their experience using alternative domains of

... the most captivating forms of image-text expression were those that created a narrative with a sense of progression.

linguistic meaning, it also provided a visual lens through which they could illustrate their perspective. In other words, students exhibited agency by subverting hegemonic language (with metaphors) and hegemonic modalities of communication (with images). By combining participatory methods with arts-based methods, photovoice research enabled them to convey their experience in their own terms, transcending the limits of the student voice as represented by conventional forms of assessment.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This project builds on Samura and colleagues' (2021) study of photovoice in residence halls by further demonstrating how the methodology enables students to represent their own navigation of residential spaces. Executing a participatory action research project such as photovoice requires a thoughtful approach to the labor requirements and power dynamics that contextualize participant voice (Higgins, 2016; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). With the requisite resources and institutional commitment, photovoice can transform how housing professionals understand the student voice and student learning. Furthermore, this methodology can be beneficial to a wide range of higher education leaders who seek new, richer ways to understand the student experience.

Our study found that photovoice elucidates personal student experiences that connect to issues of belonging and identity. Photovoice research aims to develop critical consciousness, influence policy, and offer non-linguistic modes of expression to participants (Latz, 2017). The central goal of our study is to challenge normative terms of communication, which is why we crafted research questions about artistic techniques and student agency in the photovoice process. In addition to amplifying student voices about their experience with bulletin boards, we integrated the ICAP learning framework as a way to understand how they learn from these displays. We found that students engaged with their own identities to intensify the learning process, exhibited agency through their artistic choices and the way they presented their reflections, and experienced deep learning as a result of being positioned to interact with the boards and residence life leaders. In addition to engaging with photovoice methodology to share their learning with these leaders, student-participants shared their experience with peers, thus galvanizing interest by using relational networks to leverage the influence of popular culture. These energizing features point to the way that arts-based research can affirm affective experiences as legitimate data (Barone & Eisner, 2012) and incorporate relationships in the learning process (Edwards, 2015).

This study benefited the students who participated, yielded useful information for residence life staff about the bulletin board program, and demonstrated an example of direct learning assessment that is not possible in a conventional survey. Moreover, the study produced a form of student feedback that is more personal, complex, and rich than data from surveys designed to understand the student experience. Photovoice is an ethics-driven, creative endeavor, and it provides a research design that can be beneficial as well as transformational. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the study, residents connect with bulletin boards due to their identity and past experiences. What strategies might housing staff use to create bulletin boards that allow everyone to feel seen and heard?
2. How do bulletin boards in residential spaces contribute to student learning and engagement?
3. How might RAs use these boards to create community among their residents?
4. Could housing departments encounter issues of someone disagreeing with a bulletin board's content and possibly creating conflict in the community? How could you mitigate this possibility with future bulletin boards?
5. What elements or strategies might be used to bring attention to a bulletin board if it is in an obscure location?
6. What are some limitations RAs might experience when creating their bulletin boards? How might these limitations affect their quality?
7. Do you believe that there are different approaches to bulletin boards? Does that depend on the residents or the hall staff?
8. What are some of the benefits of using the photovoice method from this study? In what other ways could a department employ the methodology for data collection?
9. How frequently do you think bulletin boards should be updated to keep residents engaged in the content?
10. In what ways does the ICAP framework used in this study change the way you or your department can facilitate bulletin board content?

Discussion questions developed by Adrienna Chaparro, Texas Woman's University