

## **Smoke Alarms and Smoke Screens: The Learning Journey of an Undergraduate**

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### **Abstract**

*This research project examined the use of photographs as a valid data collection tool within educational action research. It was a small-scale qualitative study focussing on the lifelong learning journey of BA Education Studies students at the University of Derby.*

*Whilst empirical research is an integral element of many undergraduate programmes, most often students use traditional methods to collect data, predominately interviews and questionnaires. This project aimed to demonstrate to students the value of collecting data using more contemporary forms - in this instance photography - to enhance other data collection methods.*

*The study involved working with a group of second year BA Education Studies students studying Research Methods as part of their degree programme. They were invited (over the course of one week) to take a photograph that represented for them their current views and feelings associated with being a second year undergraduate. Using photography as part of a set of data collection tools (photography and reflective interviews) the study records students' views as they traverse their undergraduate programme and reveals the highs and lows of their experiences. In particular, the study considered how, or if, undergraduate students accumulate and transmit cultural and social capital within their experience of learning, through the construction of their 'self', (discussed as habitus by Bourdieu (1977), and through their interactions in higher education (discussed as practices within fields of experience by Bourdieu, 1977).*

*The findings from the project suggest that the use of photographs to support qualitative research studies can be used successfully by researchers and students alike to enhance the richness of data collection. Lecturers can support students to understand the*

*research process more effectively by engaging them as active participants in research projects and by demonstrating data collection tools in action i.e. in this study photographs and reflective interviews. The study concludes that the use of photographs enabled the development of a more meaningful and reflective research interview, resulting in a rich data set. Additionally, the study records the lifelong learning journey of undergraduates who reflect that more needs to be done by higher education providers to support them to achieve their degree successfully. Further findings indicate that the undergraduate experience is felt very differently and individually by students, who traverse the higher education system.*

**Key words:**

Research methods; qualitative research; educational action research; photography; learner journeys; lifelong learning, undergraduates

**Introduction**

Empirical research is an integral element of many undergraduate programmes. Often students use traditional methods of collecting data, particularly interviews and questionnaires. In this study, students were invited to be active participants in a research project to analyse if this led to an enhanced understanding of the research process. Additionally, the use of photographs is considered as a data collection tool. The study involved working with a group of BA Education Studies students, who were invited (over the course of one week) to take a photograph that represented for them their current views and feelings associated with being a second year undergraduate. Students were asked to submit their photographs electronically for analysis. Following initial analysis, students, who submitted a photograph, were further invited to undertake a reflective interview to develop the analysis further. Three students agreed to participate in an interview.

**Context**

Education Studies as a topic of curriculum and a subject of a degree is relatively new, emerging in recent decades, alongside post 1992 universities. Such programmes routinely invite students to engage in critical evaluation, discussion and analysis of the concept of education, from a range of perspectives: historical, psychological, sociological and international. In addition, programmes often have an element of empirical research to enable students to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding they will inevitably need to be able to demonstrate and utilise in future employment.

However, a review of students' work at the University of Derby revealed that in spite of being taught about a range of research methods that could be drawn upon when undertaking their Independent Study, students most commonly reverted to the development of a questionnaire, and occasionally, interviews in order to gather data for their fieldwork. The programme lecturing team felt that students needed to enhance their capability and capacity to undertake more rigorous and innovative research, by drawing on a broader range of data collection tools. The team felt this would enable students to develop a deeper understanding of research, and its application and usefulness to modern day employment activities.

In redesigning the content for the Research Methods module, the team wanted to enable students to develop an understanding of a range of contemporary data collection tools, to experience them in action and also to explore if active participation in the research process may increase knowledge of, and confidence in, engaging in research activity. It is important to note that this module is framed within an educational action research approach and, as such, there is an expectation that students will focus their research question on an aspect of educational practice to inform teaching and learning going forward. The practitioner as a reflective researcher; and the voice of the research participant in research are both strong elements of the module (see Lewin, 1948, Schon, 1983, Carr and Kemmis 1986 for detailed discussion on the origins and purpose of action research).

### **Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong learning within a higher education context is particularly informed and influenced by the widening participation agenda; a significant strategy to enhance the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds to attend, and achieve higher education qualifications. This strategy was operationalised through the expansion of the Higher Education system in England in 1997 following the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997). The University of Derby emerged as part of this expansion and, as such, has a strong widening participation agenda, welcoming students from all backgrounds to study and achieve higher education awards.

Lifelong learning has been drawn upon as the focus through which to undertake this research project. Through the production of photograph images and personal reflections through reflective interviews, students were provided with the opportunity to be both a participant in the research and have a voice, and also to explore the role of photography as a data collection method.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concepts of Bourdieu (1977) have been drawn upon as a framework through which to interpret and analyse the data collected, as part of this research project,

mainly cultural and social capitals. The *practices* (Bourdieu 1977) associated with 'being an undergraduate' were used as a focus to develop an understanding of what it is like to be a second year undergraduate.

In attempting to understand the structures that underpin an undergraduate experience, it is useful to draw on the concept of capitals. Capitals are drawn on by Bourdieu (1977) as a framework to explore and understand the structures and distribution of different types and sub-types of capital that influence how such structures of a society are both felt and used. Cultural and social capitals have informed the discussion for this paper. Cultural capital was introduced into Bourdieu's work as he explored the unequal academic achievement of individuals in the higher education system of France, and how the distribution of 'cultural capital' was invested, with resultant effects on academic success, measured specifically through qualification outcome. Social capital, a term widely adopted and used in the literature (see for example, Field, 2003) is used by Bourdieu to describe a set of valued relations with significant others (Bourdieu, 1990). Whilst he acknowledged 'family' is the main arena for the accumulation and transmission of this form of capital, Bourdieu recognised that relationships between different groups of people and individuals within a particular arena or *field* contribute to the overall experience of higher education and have the potential to influence academic achievement. This study considered how, or if, undergraduate students accumulate and transmit cultural and social capital within their experience of learning, through the construction of their 'self', (discussed as *habitus* by Bourdieu), and through their interactions in higher education (discussed as *fields* of experience by Bourdieu).

### **Photography as a Data Collection Tool**

Photography is an established method of collecting information for research. Most notably, Hine (1874-1940 in Savin-Baden 2010) identified the value of photographs when he said 'If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera' (online). The role of photographs as a research data collection tool is increasingly discussed in the literature (see for example Rose, 2012) as a way to enable the researcher to exemplify the most crucial aspects of his/her research in order to best represent the results of his/her research. Photo interviewing, or photo-elicitation, is now well practised in social science research (Trachtenberg, 1990) but is a relatively new method of data collection in educational research. This may be because of the ethical challenges posed by potentially taking photographs in a classroom environment, or because of the lack of understanding of the potential value of photographs in educational action research.

By using photographs, there is the capacity both to identify and explore objective reality *and* to subjectify it. It is in this dual function that the value of using photography as a research method lies. Sontag (1977) argued that photographic

images did not represent statements about the world, but they were part of the world and in this sense they serve as pieces of evidence.

As such, the use of photographs to support interviewing and elicit information enables the researcher to choose to introduce a series of photographs to draw out additional information during an interview and enhance the research participant's involvement in the interview interaction. Alternatively, photo-elicitation in the form of 'auto-driving' allows the interview to be driven by the research participants (see for example Heisley and Levy, 1991) by asking research participants to take photographs for themselves. Such an approach provides the opportunity for a negotiated understanding of an event to be developed and also provides a means by which to give the research participant a stronger role and voice in the research study, both by being responsible for the collection of photographs that they want to discuss and then engaging in discussion, reflection and analysis of their meaning through a reflective interview.

By using photographs as one method of data collection, along with reflective interviewing for subsequent data analysis, students could both be involved in the research process, and also explore their experiences in relation to their higher education experience.

### **Research Methodology**

One class of second year undergraduates, all studying a required module as part of their BA Education Studies degree programme - Research Methods for Independent Studies - were invited, over the course of one week, to take a photograph that represented for them how they were feeling or experiencing their lifelong learning journey as higher education students. As a focus, they were asked to think about:

Why are you here?

How do you feel about being a second year undergraduate?

What are the challenges and barriers you are facing?

Of the 19 students in the group, 10 students submitted a photograph by email with varying degrees of supporting narrative (a 52% response rate). Students were assured that their identity would remain confidential, and anonymity would be upheld at all times.

Of the 10 students, who participated in the project, 8 were females and 2 were males; 5 participants (50%) of the group were also parents. Subsequently, these students were invited to participate in a reflective interview; 3 students put themselves forward to participate in the interview.

In using photographs as one of the research methods for data collection, their limitations must be acknowledged. Whilst they can be seen as a powerful tool that provides opportunities to trigger openings for deeper discussion for research participant, thus potentially providing new perspectives or explanations for a topic, there are challenges ethically in terms of ownership of photographs and the sharing of the images.

For the purposes of this research, all students in the group were initially fully informed of the role and purpose of the research, and were advised that their participation in the project was optional. Those who did elect to participate and submit a photograph were all made aware that the images would be used both as a teaching resource and for publication purposes. The photographs were shared with the whole student group for further interpretation and discussion. Students who submitted a photograph were then invited to participate in a reflective interview. Three students put themselves forward. The findings from both the photographs and interviews are shared below.

## **Findings and Discussion**

There are two key areas for discussion resulting from this research: firstly, the role of photographs as a data collection method and secondly, understanding the undergraduate lifelong learning journey from which a range of themes emerged.

In undertaking this project, the primary aim was to demonstrate to students the value of drawing on a range of data collection strategies to inform a research project, and potentially to elicit a stronger and more robust data set that could be analysed. Students were invited to be involved in each step of the research project by firstly considering whether or not to participate in the project; then the type of photograph they may take; how to submit the photograph and whether or not to add any supporting narrative or let the photograph stand alone; to attempt collectively to interpret firstly each photograph, and then the group of photographs, before drawing some conclusion. The final reflective interviews and final analysis form the discussion for this paper.

It was evident that students, who participated in the study, were interested in observing the group analysis of each individual photograph; and the range of interpretations led to an interesting discussion around both the objectivity and subjectivity of the image, the interpretation and the researcher and the researched. The parallel ambition of the study was to explore the lifelong learning experiences of undergraduate students. The voices of the students in the study provide strong examples of the role of capital in navigating an undergraduate programme and the challenges experienced. The use of photographs to develop this discussion formed a significant area of reflection and consideration.

Below is a small selection of some of the photographs that were submitted as part of the project; with the supporting narrative.

### Research Participant 1: Smoke Alarm



*'This is a picture of the smoke alarm that keeps going off for no reason and is stopping me from doing my uni work due to distraction and unreasonable anger due to my hatred, verging on phobia, of noises repeating over and over!! This just seems to sum up my assignment writing experiences; I plan to sit and do them, then something annoying crops up that needs dealing with!!'*

(Research participant 1)

For this student, this image represented the challenges she faced when approaching the task of writing assignments and how distractions acted to allow avoidance of the task.

### Research Participant 2: Orange Tree



*'I have taken a picture of an orange tree that my dad planted in the summer. It sums up how I feel about my course half way through because it is growing just as I feel I am. It is also just starting to grow, it is at the beginning of its life, or journey, and that is where I feel I am. I would have liked to take a picture of a flower which is flourishing, but that is a bit difficult at this time of year [autumn], and a flower at the*

*height of its life would not represent me very much, as I do not feel I am there yet. It's very cheesy, but that's how I feel.'*

(Research participant 2)

This image/photograph demonstrates for this student the value of being an undergraduate who is enjoying her programme of study and recognises the development of herself through the engagement in undergraduate study. There is clear evidence of the student drawing on social capital, demonstrated through the importance of her family supporting her through her study.

### **Research Participant 3: Balancing Act**



*'I have attached the photo as requested which I felt shows how most of my programme has been, a balance of work, children, husband and social life!'*

(Research participant 3)

In this image there is clear evidence of the need to be several people with very differing roles and responsibilities. For this student the challenge is to ensure that her other responsibilities do not compromise her ambition to achieve an undergraduate degree. On initial analysis, there is potential to explore dimensions of social capital through the dynamics of family in terms of family support and cultural capital in relation to the aspiration to provide for a family's futures through the investment in one's own education to afford opportunities for future generations of the family.

### *Developing Confidence in Research Design by Engaging in 'Real' Research*

Enabling students to participate in a 'real' research project afforded the opportunity for students to discuss the very real issues surrounding the development of a research design, particularly around access, sample, ethics and confidentiality and

also around the use of a range of research methods. Questions were asked regarding whether photography alone as a research method would be robust, whether there had to be subsequent interviews, who should take the photographs, how should they be stored, how should they be used and, of course, who takes responsibility for their interpretation, as well as issues of ethics, anonymity and confidentiality. Students reported an increased confidence in their ability to be able to develop a research design. This was evidenced in their successfully completed assignment tasks for the module, which required students to undertake a small scale piece of research.

### *The Lifelong Learning Journey of Undergraduates*

Whilst undertaking the reflective interviews, the photographs were used alongside the research questions noted earlier. Using a reflective interview practice afforded the opportunity to elicit a detailed account of the research participant's experience of higher education and position it within a framework of lifelong learning, exploring each individual's use of capital.

Through the submission of photographs, with varying degrees of supporting narrative, the students sought to understand and explain how their individual *habitus* (their system of dispositions or behaviours) were informed by their experience of higher education (their current *field* of experience). Bourdieu (1977) explains *field* as a social arena in which struggles of power and relationships are played out, informed by a dominant cultural position, obtained through capital. Interestingly, of the students who were interviewed, they all articulated particular challenges they faced: emotionally, financially, as well as recognising the demands of the programme; but they sought to explain their experience as an acutely unique one which was unlikely to be replicated by others – either within their class group, or amongst undergraduates more widely. There may be several reasons for this – firstly this was an evening group and, as such, the group was popular for students who had care commitments; particularly parents. Secondly, some of the students in this group are termed 'January starters'; this means they enrol on the start of their programme in January and as such often seek smaller classes in which they may feel less overwhelmed than in large lecture situations. Thirdly, some of the evening students are more likely to be mature students rather than traditional undergraduate students, because they have care responsibilities.

During each individual interview, every student was re-presented with the photograph s/he had submitted previously. The students were asked to focus their discussions around their journey so far as undergraduates, identifying any particular challenges or barriers; their ambitions following the completion of their course and their reasons for undertaking this course at this time. A range of themes emerged.

## *Smoke Alarms and Smoke Screens*

### *Distractions:*

All research participants identified the challenge for them of continuing with their studies, despite a range of distractions; whether that was employment, family, or other social commitments. Such distractions often led to academic work being completed with difficulty, but the self determination and ambition to be successful allowed work to be submitted on time. The social groups that were established prior to engaging in higher education appear not only to act as a support mechanism to enable study, but also, interesting, potentially to disrupt their study.

### *Emotions:*

The research participants identified a range of emotions attached to their undergraduate studies from frustration to growth. Some students described this as a rollercoaster with lots of highs and lows, and a feeling of achievement on reaching the end of the ride. For other students, it was a second chance at undergraduate study; having felt a failure for not completing undergraduate studies previously, they felt ambitious for their success and determined to demonstrate their capability. This external drive to demonstrate to others was a consistent story amongst all the research interviewees. One of the major emotional challenges identified by research participant 3 was the capacity, as she describes, of 'stepping up to the mark'; particularly in relation to academic writing and time.

### *Motivations:*

The motivation to engage in their study was particularly interesting. For some students, their motivation was drawn from the desire for self-fulfilment; their desire to demonstrate outwardly to their family and friends that they had the capability of achieving a degree. For others it was being driven by their desire to obtain a career working in the education sector; this can be strongly associated with the crafting of cultural capital. Students demonstrated the high value they associated with education, particularly the ambition to achieve the desired outcome of a higher education qualification.

Research participant 1 described how she had commenced full time employment with a small company following A level study, but became exasperated by the repetitiveness of the job. Her decision to apply to university was combined with her frustration at work and with an experience whilst teaching horse-riding during which she had been encouraged to think about teaching in a more formal setting – particularly primary school teaching.

For research participant 2, her motivation to engage in undergraduate study was a timely one, resulting from financial support from her employer and emotional support from her partner – demonstrating the value of social capital in supporting lifelong learning opportunities.

### Support networks:

Students involved in this study drew little support from their peers. In fact, their experience of being an undergraduate was described as a very personal and unique one. Whilst they discussed they were happy to participate in any learning activity required of them in lecture time, whether group discussions, presentations or activities, in reality they drew little support from each other outside of the formal lecture situation, preferring instead to seek support from other family members. This is an interesting and surprising use and valuing of social capital with the relationships between their peer group being less valued than those of their pre-established social networks.

For research participant 2, her undergraduate journey appeared to be quite an autonomous one, with the biggest challenge she felt she had faced being picking up study after a period of absence. However, she articulated very strongly how closely she associated her success in her studies with the support offered to her by her family. Additionally, she described the development of relationships with the academic team and wider academic support framework provided by the university as key to her ongoing success. The role of her peer group did not form a significant part in her higher education experience.

### Interpretation of Data:

It was very interesting to observe the apparent symmetry or disconnect between initial group analysis of submitted photographs, and subsequent analysis through reflective interviewing. Research participant 3 submitted a photograph entitled 'Balancing Act'. During the reflective interview the students reflected on the differences between the initial analysis undertaken by the student cohort, and the reality of the picture; again highlighting both the objectivity and subjectivity of photograph-interpretation. On initial analysis the class group had determined that this was a desk that had been worked at during the day and where the work had been completed. In fact, the reality for this student was that she had completed her paid work, taken care of her family, had a family meal and was just about to start her studies. She tells a story of her desk, which her partner built for her, being situated in her bedroom and describes herself as a mother, who studies full time, works part time and is mother to three children, one of whom is also at university. This is a

valuable insight into the dynamics of both social and cultural capital informing and influencing higher academic engagement.

Interestingly, when all research participants were asked 'what's it like to be here?' all students felt they were not typical students, questioning the notion and understanding of being a 'typical' undergraduate and felt they did not recognise the stereotypical image often portrayed in the media regarding undergraduate students. All students approached their programme of study with determination, ambition and focus, which they took extremely seriously, attributing value to the intended outcome of a higher education qualification.

## **Conclusions**

From this small scale piece of research, it is clear there are lessons to be learnt, for lecturers, for students and for those people responsible for supporting a successful higher education experience.

The use of photographs to enable the development of reflective interviews allowed a much richer data set to be gathered for analysis and also provided a way for interviewees (in this instance students) to become more active participants in the research process, by self-eliciting a photograph for subsequent discussion through reflective interviewing techniques. By engaging students in a research project, they were able to consider the 'real' consequences of decisions made and reflect on the challenges faced. Students reported that by engaging in this project, even in a small way, enabled them to engage more fully in the development of their own independent research project.

This study revealed the powerful effect of prior experiences that significantly influence the lifelong learning journey of an undergraduate, particularly one who traverses the system in a non-traditional, non-linear way. Of importance, the students who engaged in the study revealed a series of very different and individual accounts of their undergraduate experience. For some, their study did not follow a traditional route, but was made up of disappointing previous learning experiences, and second chances; notions well established in lifelong learning conceptual understandings. However, the cultural capital they associated with a higher education qualification in terms of position in society and career opportunities, and the support of established networks of relationships of family and friends – social capital – were crucial in enabling them to navigate their studies successfully.

For some students, undertaking their undergraduate study is a mechanism for empowerment, allowing them to establish a position of status within their social group; reflecting a minority of the population who hold higher education qualifications. Whilst reflecting on their undergraduate experiences, as part of their

lifelong learning journey, research participants uniformly referred to the financial challenges they faced as the major challenge to their study; they also articulated both their flexibility and determination as characteristics that have enabled them to overcome such challenges and succeed in their studies to date.

In light of the changing landscape of higher education, it is crucial that higher education providers, and particularly lecturers, recognise the diversity of their student populations, the experiences they bring with them and the demands that they will make on institutions and programmes. Supporting students to have a positive undergraduate experience has, arguably, never been more important. It is evident from this study that students are acutely aware of the value of a degree to them in the economic market. However, the value of the degree to them, both culturally and socially, is also evident.

The major pre-occupation, and challenge for students, involved in this study was financial and it is this challenge which must be revisited by government in the light of a changing funding framework, which may lead to a reduction in an individual's investment in lifelong learning and have a subsequent negative influences on the economy capability of the country.

The role of higher education as part of a wider strategy of lifelong learning, and its role in supporting social, cultural as well as economic capital, should not be compromised in building a strong learning society. It is evident that whilst higher education providers have carried out/embarked on a significant amount of work to provide opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, there continues to be much work to be undertaken to understand more fully the experience of higher education students, particularly as a unique, personal and individual one.

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