

Photovoice for Teaching and Learning Global Media

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how to integrate photovoice into teaching and learning global media in Japanese higher education. It can be a powerful digital storytelling tool since students, belonging to Generation Z, are accustomed to using digital devices and take pictures with their cellphones regularly. Moreover, it can be applied to the examination of multiple issues overlapping with the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations (2015). Although some studies have been conducted to deal with global and local issues by employing photovoice, such attempts are scarce in Japan. How can a photovoice method be integrated into a global media course? What topics will be appropriate for photovoice involving university students? And in which stage of photovoice will they notice a change in their learning? Twelve university students and the researcher were engaged in a photovoice project inspired by hooks's (1994) concept of transformative pedagogy and composed of three phases aiming at elevating the abilities: 1) to analyze, 2) to think critically, and 3) to produce a message. The survey results show that importing photovoice into the university classroom contributes to cultivating the students' autonomy, critical thinking skills, and tolerance for diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as the four elements of global competence, which are defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018).

Keywords: global media, higher education, photovoice, youth

Introduction

It is getting increasingly important for the youth to have a deep understanding of global affairs and become citizens who can work towards a sustainable world. Universities in English-speaking countries such as the United States of America, Canada, and Australia have offered courses on global studies dealing with social, political, and cultural phenomena in today's globalized and digitalized world (e.g., Carleton University, 2024; University of California, Berkeley, 2024; University

of the Sunshine Coast, n.d.). One of the courses concentrates on global media as a subject. The University of California, Berkeley (2024), for instance, delineates the course contents:

This course focuses on topics in national, transnational, and global cinema, television, photography, and/or new media, examining the ways in which shared cultural discourses, institutions, histories, and modes of production are negotiated through various media practices within and between individual cities, nations, regions, and/or global networks. (para. 1)

In addition, the course objectives are explained in detail:

Students are expected to acquire new informational content about the national/regional/global media landscape in question, with an emphasis on the role media products play in articulating cultural affinities and differences; to acquire a conceptual vocabulary necessary for the examination of media practices organized in large cultural categories and to understand the advantages and limits of that approach; to develop the analytic skills necessary to interpret in a socio-historical and formal context the art and media objects belonging to that area and learn about the cultural contexts in which those media practices are located, and to develop the research tools necessary for advanced undergraduate writing on film and media in the area studied in the course. (University of California, Berkeley, 2024, para. 1)

In this way, it can be said from this example that a global media course delves into media production, distribution, and consumption extensively and aims to help students to explore various media messages and representations beyond the binary of the global and the local. According to Wilson and Dissanayake (1996), from the world of the twenty-first century emerges:

... a new world-space of cultural production and national representation which is simultaneously becoming more *globalized* (unified around dynamics of capital logic moving across borders) and more *localized* (fragmented into contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition, and resistance) in everyday texture and composition. (p. 1)

Hence, it is essential to develop young people's media literacy so that they can grasp the nature and characteristics of ever-changing global media not from a dichotomous point of view but broadly and flexibly.

This has a relevance to educating students to be globally competent, for the acquisition of global competence “requires media literacy, defined as the ability to access, analyse and critically evaluate media messages, as well as to create new media content” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018, p. 9). In this paper, I employ a photovoice method and argue that it is effective in teaching and learning global media and simultaneously cultivating students’ global competence. OECD (2018) articulates the possibility that “educating for global competence can help form new generations who care about global issues and engage in tackling social, political, economic and environmental challenges” (p. 5). Thus, the globally competent youth can contribute to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations (2015). Students, belonging to Generation Z, are accustomed to using digital devices and take pictures with their cellphones regularly, so photovoice can be a powerful digital storytelling tool for them. Moreover, photovoice can be applied to the examination of multiple issues overlapping with the SDGs, as Breny and McMorrow (2021) point out:

The list of social experiences that could potentially be explored using photovoice is seemingly endless and includes critical topics facing society today such as racial injustice, violence, homelessness, healthcare access, education, experiences of sex workers, experiences of refugees and other immigrants, and more. (p. 3)

Although some studies have been conducted to focus on the above issues by employing photovoice (e.g., Agner et al., 2023; Fakhari et al., 2023; Morton et al., 2020), such attempts are scarce in Japan. How can a photovoice method be integrated into a global media course? What topics will be appropriate for photovoice involving university students? And in which stage of photovoice will they notice a change in their learning?

Transformative Pedagogy as a Conceptual Framework

I apply the concept of transformative pedagogy discussed by hooks (1994) to examine the questions raised above. She holds a critical view of education accompanied by “the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement” (1994, p. 39). Without feeling safe, it is difficult for learners to engage themselves in active learning and participate in class fully. In her work, hooks indicates that her teaching is under the influence of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy:

Freire's thought gave me the support I needed to challenge the "banking system" of education, that approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it. (1994, p. 14)

To transgress the "banking" education model, hooks asserts the need to practice transformative pedagogy that attaches importance to elevating students' autonomy and critical thinking skills and acknowledging diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Borrowing hooks's concept of transformative pedagogy enables us to realize what needs to be done to offer a global media course to university students in Japan. There are two major points that should be considered. First, it is essential to avoid imposing the teacher's view and opinion upon learners coming from diverse backgrounds. The teacher must be aware that each individual carries her/his history, culture, tradition, and custom with her/him while learning in the classroom. Secondly, it is necessary to select teaching materials to be used in class with a culturally responsive lens. Some materials contain illustrations and descriptions that may reinforce or even newly create bias. Embracing a culturally responsive perspective helps acknowledge the diversity of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability among the teacher and learners.

To put transformative pedagogy into practice, hooks states that promoting "a feeling of community" in the classroom setting is indispensable so that students can learn actively and "live more fully in the world" (1994, p. 40). To achieve this, the teacher needs to "recognize the value of each individual voice" (1994, p. 40). Therefore, in providing a global media course in Japanese higher education, it is vital for the teacher to listen to each learner having a different background and viewpoint and treat each one of them not as a knowledge receiver to be taught but as a future global citizen with autonomy. In doing so, the classroom will be transformed into a new space where the teacher and students can interact with each other and gain a mutual understanding. As hooks remarks, in such a space, "students are eager to break through barriers to knowing. They are willing to surrender to the wonder of re-learning and learning ways of knowing that go against the grain" (1994, p. 44). Inspired by her concept of transformative pedagogy, I utilize a photovoice method and aim to show its effectiveness and possibility in teaching and learning global media in the Japanese university classroom.

***Born into Brothels* as a Course Material**

This paper is based on a photovoice project initiated by twelve university students (see Table 1) and the researcher living in Kumamoto. It presents a model of using a film *Born into Brothels* as a course material and carrying out photovoice in Japanese higher education. *Born into Brothels*, released in 2004, centers on how children living in a red-light district in Calcutta, India represent their own world(s) through the lens of a camera that was handed from the filmmakers. The film applies a video diary technique; Briski, one of the producers, frequently appears in front of a video camera, talking about her feelings and experiences in interacting with the children (i.e., Avijit, Gour, Kochi, Manik, Puja, Shanti, Suchitra, and Tapasi). It is considered as “a method which not only captures the narratives of experience and lived cultural practices, but also the visual nature of the construction and display of identities through the use of cultural products” (Holliday, 2000, p. 509). By creating a documentary film with an essence of ethnography, the filmmakers seek to reflect themselves in the process of filming the daily lives of the children and to provide them with the opportunity to represent themselves through the use of a camera.

What is the significance of this camera given to the children by the filmmakers? As Pink (2001) indicates that “video is conceptualized as a means of empowerment and of ‘making visible’ marginalized groups or individuals” (p. 594), it is obvious from the cameras handed out to the children living in the red-light district that the filmmakers hope to empower them and have their voices heard through their photographs. At the same time, however, analyzing the film from a culturally responsive perspective enables us to find a complicated paradox regarding the gaze. While the children seem to possess agency by taking pictures and choosing those to be exhibited at a gallery, they are also gazed upon through the lens of a video camera held by the filmmakers coming from the West. Even their photographs displayed at a gallery are seen by visitors. “This visitor,” remarks Rose (2001), “is perhaps above all constituted as an ‘eye’: someone who sees and, through seeing, understands” (p. 182). Rose states that institutions such as museums and galleries “do this explicitly, precisely offering their objects to their visitors as a kind of educational spectacle” (2001, p. 182). Thus, even though it seems as if the children have agency in the film, behind it exists a layer of gaze watching them. Using *Born into Brothels* as a course material implies the power structure between the Global North and the Global South. At the same time, it reveals their reciprocity, as Straubhaar et al. (2018) articulate thus:

Even though nations differ culturally and politically, they are seldom

isolated. As we look at the globalization of media, we see that one of its most obvious aspects is an extensive flow of a variety of media contents between countries. (p. 530)

Hence, there is a need to examine materials closely and select appropriate ones for teaching and learning global media.

Table 1. List of Student Photographers

Names as pseudonyms	Age
Courtney	20
Emma	20
Julie	20
Lily	20
Luna	21
Mackey	21
Mal	21
Merry	20
Mia	20
Mill	20
Noah	22
Uto	20

Photovoice Project 2024

In May 2024, the twelve students and the researcher started a photovoice project composed of three phases aiming at cultivating the following abilities respectively: 1) to analyze, 2) to think critically, and 3) to produce a message. In Phase 1 for enhancing the ability to analyze, the students read several research articles and discussed various topics including the quality of global competence, the issues of gender and race, and a wide variety of nonverbal communication across cultures. In addition, they were engaged in a comparative study of India and Japan using the cultural iceberg model proposed by Hall (1976/1989) and the six-dimension model of national culture developed by Hofstede (2011). To elevate the ability to think critically in Phase 2, they practiced participatory observation while watching *Born into Brothels*. They also selected several pictures taken by the children in Calcutta

and examined what message is conveyed through each of them. Finally, in Phase 3 for fostering the ability to produce a message, they took photographs in connection with the children's visual expression, worked collaboratively, and organized the photographs into a short film. *Photovoice Project 2024* begins with a dedication message created by the project team: "Dedicated to everyone who needs a push to move forward." This paper places importance on the students' autonomy and self-expression and draws on their voices to a great extent. Due to the copyright of the pictures taken by the children in India, the student photographers use their own words to describe what is depicted instead of inserting them in this paper.

Photovoice Project 2024 consists of six segments featuring six pictures taken by the children living in Calcutta (Figures 1-6). The short film starts with Avijit's picture titled "Dog," and Courtney and Mal explain why they selected this particular visual work:

From this picture, you can read the health status of a stray dog and the lack of maintenance of roads. The stray dog is not getting proper nourishment because it is thin. Also, the road behind the dog is different from Japan, so we thought it would be interesting to compare, so we chose this photo.

Then the two project members comment on their pictures displayed after Avijit's:

Courtney: I took this photo with my friend at the entrance of a building of our school on a rainy day. It was a big snake that ran away when we tried to pass by. With this photo, I want to convey that a danger lurks even in the places we think are always safe, and that even in our everyday lives, we can encounter unexpected things.

Mal: There are two things you can see from this picture. The first is that the roads and plants are beautifully maintained. The second is that it is a situation where even stray cats can be nourished enough to grow properly. You can see that it's a little plump compared to the stray dog in the picture of Avijit.



Figure 1. The First Segment of *Photovoice Project 2024*. © The Intercultural Communication Laboratory, PUK, 2024.

Next, a picture titled “Cat” by Suchitra appears in the second segment, and Lily and Uto give a full account of it as follows:

This photograph represents a cat as being powerless to live. This cat looks tired and very sorrowful, combined with its squinty eyes and an old building in the background. This cat seems to be looking somewhere far away and appears to be in a daze, as if its mind is not here. We chose this photograph because Lily has two cats.

Then the two project members describe their pictures arranged next to Suchitra’s:

Lily: This is a shot of two cats peeking at us. The one on the right is sitting like a loaf of bread, and the other on the left is sticking out its tongue. I took them to be daydreaming because of their seemingly expressionless faces. Their freedom is restricted by the screen door. I figured they wanted to get away from this place and go somewhere far away.

Uto: In this photograph, a cat sitting on the bike is depicted. The reason why I chose this photograph is that this cat also looks tired. Lethargic means there is no motivation. It tells us that it does not feel motivated to do anything.

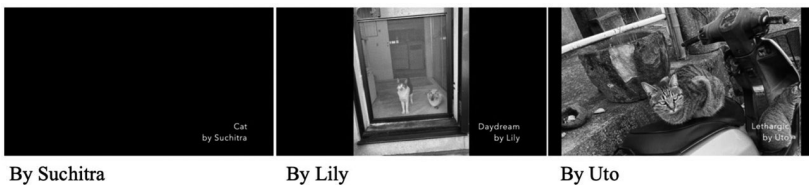


Figure 2. The Second Segment of *Photovoice Project 2024*. © The Intercultural Communication Laboratory, PUK, 2024.

The third segment starts with Gour's picture titled "Running," and Luna and Merry present their interpretation of it:

In the photo, Puja is running on the road of the red-light district. It seems that she is not only playing and having fun, but also escaping. We think this photo shows her mind that she wants to escape from her serious situation in the red-light district and hopes to be free. In addition, we think it shows the children's ambition that they want to try a new thing like going to school.

Then the two project members recount their pictures inserted after Gour's:

Luna: In my photograph, a colorful slide is depicted and there is no one playing with it. I remember the fact that the children in the red-light district face a severe situation. So, I consider that the photo represents the existence of the children who have hope and try to live within their predetermined destiny. On a rainy day or cloudy day with the possibility of rain, children usually do not play outside, and the air is gloomy. So, I'd like to create a similar atmosphere by contrasting the cloudy darkness like the situation they face and the colorful or bright playground equipment as a symbol of their hope.

Merry: I took a photo of a flower blooming vigorously in the rain. I imagined many things from Gour's photograph "Running." In his photograph, Puja is running. The city where Puja lives is not an easy place to live in. However, in Gour's photograph, Puja seems full of hope. Her strength in desperately trying to live in difficult circumstances is shown. The flower I photographed is also struggling to survive in the harsh environment of heavy rain. I titled this photo "Survive" to represent the determination to live strongly in any situation.



Figure 3. The Third Segment of *Photovoice Project 2024*. © The Intercultural Communication Laboratory, PUK, 2024.

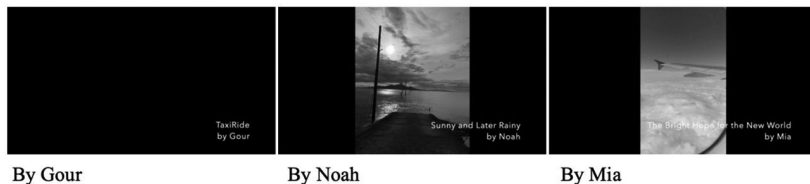
In the fourth segment, a picture titled “TaxiRide” by Gour comes into sight, and Noah and Mia elucidate why they chose it:

When we see this picture, we can feel that Puja is taking a step toward a new bright future. At first, she was not able to escape from the brothel in India. However, she finally overcame the difficulties and got a chance to go to school. We were impressed with her radiant smile full of anticipation for her future. That is why we selected this picture.

Then the two project members account for the pictures they took in connection with Gour’s:

Noah: Puja was finally able to enter the SABERA school after overcoming challenging tasks, but eventually left due to her mother’s decision. In this picture, we see the bright sun, dark clouds, and a road covered with seawater. The sun reminds me of Puja’s smile and hope when she was riding on a taxi. On the other hand, the dark clouds and the water-covered road remind me of the hardships Puja faced after entering the school. I titled this photo “Sunny and Later Rainy” to express Puja’s life, which was full of ups and downs.

Mia: This picture describes the hope for the next destination. A flying airplane indicates that it is heading for a new destination. A beautiful clear view represents the bright future Puja was going to get. She was hoping for the new world, which was school. The reason why I put this title on my photograph is that it represents Puja’s feeling of looking forward to living in a completely different world.



By Gour

By Noah

By Mia

Figure 4. The Fourth Segment of *Photovoice Project 2024*. © The Intercultural Communication Laboratory, PUK, 2024.

A picture titled “Hand” by Manik appears in the fifth segment, and Mackey and Julie make a detailed explanation of it:

The photo represents the innocence of a child. Manik is having fun to see beautiful illuminations. The message of the photo is that he enjoys his life even if he is in a tough situation. The background of this photo is beautiful, and the hand that is not completely visible is impressive.

Then the two project members delineate their pictures placed next to Manik's:

Mackey: This is a photo of Julie playing in a park. The reason I put this title is that I can feel the strength from her hand. This is the moment that she goes down the slide and shows her hand. She opens her hand and shows her palm strongly. I took this photo with her hand as a main subject and expressed her strength. This tells us the story that she lives strongly every day. This strength has some meanings. It means not only physical strength but also mental strength and strength of character and action.

Julie: I took this photo in a park because when I thought where to have fun, I came up with it. In this photo, Mackey and a swing are depicted. I want you to feel the innocence and excitement from this picture. A swing ride is not a special adventure or a special event, but simply a moment of pure enjoyment. Also, she is exciting herself freely and releasing her feelings by riding on a swing. This entire body conveys a message of freedom, happiness, and the boundless energy of youth.



Figure 5. The Fifth Segment of *Photovoice Project 2024*. © The Intercultural Communication Laboratory, PUK, 2024.

Finally, the sixth segment starts with Avijit's "Bucket4" taken by the sea, and Emma and Mill clarify why they selected his visual work:

Because we were impressed by the scene in the movie where the children enjoyed the sea. They looked very happy and shining as they played in a different environment from their daily life. They enjoyed an extraordinary

time in nature with their loved friends. It looked very fun and happy. This photo's message is that enjoying an extraordinary time with their important people is very happy.

Then the two project members explain the pictures they took in relation to Avijit's:

Emma: This photo was taken at a geyser in Miyagi. They are my family members. They were really enjoying this extraordinary and mysterious phenomenon created by nature. The message of this is that enjoying such an extraordinary phenomenon with our loved people is very happy. I named this photo "Surprise3" because they look surprised by this natural phenomenon and the title of our selected photo taken by Avijit has a number. I added 3 which is the number of children.

Mill: I titled the photo "Excitement2" because it shows two children who are amazed and impressed to see the outside world for the first time. I also associated it with Avijit's "Bucket4." These young children are likely to have been isolated from the outside world for a long time, much like the children in the film. Unlike inside the house, outside there are flowers blooming as shown in this photo. The air is warm, and there are many other exciting things for a small child. This photograph represents the joy of embarking on a journey from the small world to the wider one.



Figure 6. The Sixth Segment of *Photovoice Project 2024*. © The Intercultural Communication Laboratory, PUK, 2024.

Regarding the six photo segments arranged as shown above, Courtney and Mal indicate how they are constructed, being interrelated to each other and change gradually from the pessimistic to the optimistic:

1 and 2 are connected in that they are animals. 2 and 3 are connected in that they live even in dark situations. 3 and 4 are connected in that there are some

tough situations in life. 4 and 5 are connected in that they show progress towards a bright future. 5 and 6 represent cherishing the joy of everyday life spent with loved ones and preserving it as memory.

In this way, the twelve student photographers, who went through the three phases aiming for the development of the abilities: 1) to analyze, 2) to think critically, and 3) to produce a message, completed and released *Photovoice Project 2024*.

Discussion

A survey conducted upon completion of the collaborative visual work has found that the students benefit from participating in the photovoice project with the three phases incorporated to advance the abilities: 1) to analyze, 2) to think critically, and 3) to produce a message. First of all, the survey results suggest that importing a photovoice method inspired by hooks's concept of transformative pedagogy into the university classroom is beneficial to the learners. For example, seven students answered that they noticed a change in their learning after reading the research articles and discussing the topics such as the quality of global competence, the issues of gender and race, and a wide variety of nonverbal communication across cultures. Uto's statement reveals the extension of learner autonomy as a consequence: "Possibly, I knew some issues of race and gender unconsciously, but I understand clearly what the problems are, putting my ideas into words."

In addition, the same number of students responded that listening to other groups' presentations about their photo sequences was equally powerful for their learning. According to Julie, this activity results in the attainment of open-mindedness: "I have learned that everyone has a different perspective. Also, I have acquired the ability to broaden my horizon and accept diverse ideas."

Furthermore, six students indicated a change in their learning after comparing India and Japan by using the cultural iceberg model proposed by Hall (1976/1989) and the six-dimension model of national culture developed by Hofstede (2011). Noah mentions the enhancement of critical thinking skills: "I have met many people from different countries, races, and cultures. Before learning those models, I could not critically think about them or interpret them. The process helped me consider the problems deeply and critically." In this way, it becomes clear from the comments of the students that the photovoice project is effective in cultivating their autonomy, critical thinking, and tolerance for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The survey results also show that the photovoice project enables every

participant to strengthen the four elements of global competence, which are defined by OECD (2018). Each student photographer completed a self-evaluation assessing the level of her/his global competence based on a scale from 0 (the lowest) to 10 (the highest), and the researcher took the average of the scores. Regarding “1. the capacity to examine issues and situations of local, global and cultural significance (e.g. poverty, economic interdependence, migration, inequality, environmental risks, conflicts, cultural differences and stereotypes)” (OECD, 2018, pp. 7-8), their level has improved from 3.0 to 6.6. This is evident in Mackey’s recollection of her learning experience: “I didn’t think much about global issues before. However, I learned various issues every week. So, I started to wonder about many situations in other countries. Especially, I knew a serious situation from the movie.” Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that fostering the first element of global competence makes it possible to “draw on and combine the disciplinary knowledge and modes of thinking acquired in schools to ask questions ... concerning a local, global or cultural issue” (OECD, 2018, p. 9).

The level of “2. the capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views” (OECD, 2018, p. 8) has surged from 3.5 to 7.3. Lily’s words clarify this point: “I learned that Japan is not the norm through this class. Standards vary by country. I was able to gain a global perspective by learning about different countries and ways of thinking.” In this way, by developing the second element of global competence, some students can attain “the means to recognise that their perspectives and behaviours are shaped by multiple influences, that they are not always fully aware of these influences, and that others have views of the world that are profoundly different from their own” (OECD, 2018, p. 9).

The level of “3. the ability to establish positive interactions with people of different national, ethnic, religious, social or cultural backgrounds or gender” (OECD, 2018, p. 8) has advanced from 3.6 to 6.4. Luna states that Briski in *Born into Brothels* provides inspiration for the enhancement of this ability: “In the movie, a woman who is not Indian but wants to help the Indian children appears. I was impressed by the way people of different nationalities and cultures act to save others.” It can be argued here that cultivating the third element of global competence leads to promoting “appreciation for respectful dialogue, desire to understand the other and efforts to include marginalised groups” (OECD, 2018, p. 10).

Lastly, the level of “4. the capacity and disposition to take constructive action toward sustainable development and collective well-being” (OECD, 2018, p. 8) has seen a rise from 2.8 to 6.1. This is clear from what Merry reports regarding

a change in her view of the world: “I became interested not only in myself, but also in other people and other countries. I became able to think not only about my own happiness, but also about the happiness of others.” Hence, advancing the fourth element of global competence is intimately connected to raising students’ awareness “to improve living conditions in their own communities and also to build a more just, peaceful, inclusive and environmentally sustainable world” (OECD, 2018, p. 11).

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated how to integrate photovoice into teaching and learning global media in Japanese higher education. It has become obvious that the photovoice project inspired by hooks’s concept of transformative pedagogy contributes to enriching the students’ autonomy, critical thinking skills, and tolerance for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, it leads to the improvement of the four elements of global competence, which are specified by OECD (2018). Importing a photovoice method into the university classroom encourages learners to think critically about a variety of media practices and transform themselves into creators of alternative media allowing new perspectives to emerge and merge.

Based on the findings from this study, I provide some suggestions for developing a course syllabus specializing in global media. First, when the teacher frames her/his course, it is desirable to include the following contents: A course on global media makes an inquiry about the implications of applying digital media and technologies for global communication. It focuses on the significance and potential of global media in a variety of settings such as classroom, community, activism, museum, gallery, tourism industry, and so forth. By engaging themselves in assignments such as producing visual works by themselves, students will gain experience as global media producers.

Secondly, it is advisable to formulate a course aiming for the following objectives: 1) to better understand the impact of global media and communication on our society; 2) to examine how meanings and representations are constructed; 3) to investigate the social, cultural, and political relations among producers, their subjects, and audience; 4) to pay attention to our positionality and subjectivity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, and their intersections) both as viewer and producer; and 5) to communicate our message to the outer world through visual work production.

Higher education institutions will be an ideal place challenging learners academically so that they can apply the obtained knowledge and skills to the real-

life settings and become active global citizens of the 21st century. Those who are active in teaching and learning global media are no longer passive receivers of media messages. By pursuing photovoice in the university classroom, each person can be “the ‘creative citizen’ who is source as well as destination, producer as well as consumer, writer as well as reader, teacher as well as learner” (Hartley, 2007, p. 143).

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