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Recommended Citation

Yang, Kay (2019). "Photo-essay and Adult Immigrants' Identities and Agency," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/roundtables/10>

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Photo-essay and Adult Immigrants' Identities and Agency

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Abstract: Drawing on a photo-essay creation project conducted with a group of adult immigrants in a metropolitan area, I explore how the visual method can contribute to their identity construction and empowerment and question how we know.

Keywords: Photo-essay, immigrant, identity, agency, visual method

This roundtable discussion focuses on the ways in which creating photo-essays can help socially marginalized adult learners with identity construction and agency development and also the ways in which researchers can understand and foster the processes. It draws on a project carried out with a group of working-class immigrants in a metropolitan area for eight weeks. Each week, the participants shared their experiences of immigration in a group setting and developed individual autobiographical writing. They also took photos related to their experiences of immigration and offered feedback for each other. Their work culminated in a printed photo-essay book.

The purpose of the project was two-fold: (1) to offer research participants an opportunity to share and reflect on their experiences while developing literacy skills; (2) to gain insights into the ways in which the visual approach taken in the study can facilitate identity construction and agency development among participants. To offer them a learning experience, the project was designed on the premises that autographic writing can enable adult learners to broaden their views of themselves (Karpiak, 2000) and that participatory photography (photography of one's own experiences) is useful to helping language learners share their experiences (Gallo, 2001). Imaginative transformative learning also informed the project design. Perspective transformation in a personal life does not always rely on rational reflection on their behavior or assumptions; it can be achieved through "imaginative engagement with the everydayness of our lives" (Dirk, 2000, p. 16). Participatory photography can prompt adults to use their imagination (Clover, 2006) and contribute to developing their agency of intention (Yang, 2014).

Studies suggest that the processes of transformation and agency development are complicated to adult immigrants who are also language learners. When they learn their target language, they not only obtain information, but also develop their identities (Norton, 2013). As Norton explained, immigrants who invest in learning their target language are likely to access a wider range of resources, which allow them to reorganize their identities as immigrants. The reorganization of identities, however, does not necessarily lead situations in which they had been allowed them to think about their achievements over the years. This might have offered them confidence in what they could do in the future. One said, "[G]oing back to my neighborhood to take pictures made me remember not where I come from, but how hard it was. It's a little easier now." He wrote in his essay, "I still miss my family, friends, and culture, but I'm working to build all those in my new home." Another said, "I've never talked about it [my experience of immigration]. I just remember this part of my life that I did share with so many people for those years living in this country. It [the remembrance] makes me proud of what I have done so far and what I can do in the future."

The project afforded space where the participants “stopped to think” about what they have done. Sharing their experiences one another and reflecting on the progresses they had made over the years might have contributed to their identity construction as a person who can, and will, thrive despite hindrances. Here are my questions for you. What questions and methods could shed light on counter-evidence against my conclusion, if any? If not all identity construction liberates adult immigrants, how can a researcher/educator assist them in constructing identities that can contribute to empowerment? How can a researcher have a better understanding of the process?

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