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Photolanguage as a Research Tool in Adult and Community Education

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Keywords: photolanguage, reflection, environmental justice, community sustainability

Abstract: Photolanguage facilitates reflection and discussion in small group settings. It is useful as a research tool as it elicits rich data for analysis. Used in an environmental justice community, the use of Photolanguage provided insight into participants' motives, involvement in, and vision for a redevelopment project.

Overview of Photolanguage

Photolanguage is the use of photographs to engage participants in reflective discussion, uncover implicit assumptions and facilitate personal expression in small groups (Better Evaluation, 2014). As a tool to aid in communication eliciting verbal data, it is also a research tool. Photolanguage is a simple technique in which a collection of photographs is compiled. Photos are displayed and participants select one image that resonates with them. Participants then share their reactions to the photograph, in relation to focus questions provided by a facilitator.

Photolanguage and Community Sustainability

Photolanguage's application as a research tool is exemplified by reviewing the results of a session conducted in an environmental justice community. This community (rural, African American, southern) was engaged in redeveloping an abandoned school into a facility to serve community-identified needs. Photolanguage was utilized to research community sentiment and gather input on the redevelopment project. Data collected were responses to the following prompts: reason for choosing image or recollection about the image, vision for reuse of the school, and their potential role in the redevelopment process. A content analysis was conducted on the qualitative data using grounded theory method to discover the patterns, themes and categories of the participants' reactions to their chosen photo.

The main themes were motivation, involvement, and use/activity. Motivations are the reasons for image selection. Involvement is participants' self-identified roles in redevelopment efforts, and use/ activity is participants' ideas of the potential reuse options for the school.

Motivation

Participants' reasons for their image selections were related to past experiences at the school and future possibilities for redevelopment and reuse. Participants who cited past experiences were typically alumni and comments were related to activities in which they participated. Participants also connected images of the school to their relationships with others. As one participant shared, "this room was the cafeteria. This room holds many special memories from my childhood. Love-laughter-support! I hear it crying for HELP!" (Alumna, 2014).

Future possibilities were also reasons for choosing images. Several participants noted aesthetic reasons for their choices, citing their attraction to cleanliness, furnishings or landscaping. These aesthetic reasons were sometimes paired with hopeful sentiments, such as one comment about the example of another school, "I like this picture because its reveals the hope for the future - education" (Alum, 2014). This vision of the future is further explored by

another participant. “I would love to see it (the cafeteria) restored as a new and improved cafeteria for meetings, family gatherings and community type fellowships” (Alumna, 2014).

Participants’ motivations for image selection were related to their past experiences with the school and the future possibilities for its reuse. Analysis of these motivations revealed that overall adult participants had cherished memories of a vibrant and active setting which provided them with a support network. Participants who made image selections based on the future possibilities reveal hopeful desires for a redeveloped school that can provide the family and community connections lost when the school fell into disuse.

Involvement

Some participants’ reactions contained indications of their willingness to be involved in redeveloping the school. These reactions fell into two categories: support provided during the redevelopment effort and supporting programming after redevelopment.

Involvement during the redevelopment effort was mentioned by both adult and youth participants. Adult involvement was discussed in terms of helping with fundraising and garnering additional support for the redevelopment effort. Youth involvement focused on the physical aspects of redeveloping the building. The youth expressed intentions to help clean, paint, and decorate the building. Statements about programming support for the school were solely discussed by youth participants. Their perceived roles ranged from maintaining the building, being involved with music and arts and craft to initiating an obesity program.

Participants’ statements related to involvement express a desire to be involved in restoring a community asset, as well as identifying roles that indicate willingness to take ownership of the process and the asset.

Use or Activity

Participants’ reactions to images contained insight into the uses a redeveloped school could provide. These comments can be divided into two categories, immediate gains and broader impacts. Immediate gains include providing activities for local and regional residents such as sports, plays, job training programs, and space for meetings and family and community events. It would also restore a valued piece of history and community connection.

A useable community center will have an economic impact. One participant supports the redevelopment “so we can have [city] activities in [our city] and not [a neighboring city]. Bring the money home” (Alum, 2014). It is also viewed as a way to address the needs of area youth. Programming provided by the community members would restore an important benefit lost when the school closed. “It would be wonderful if we could get teachers of our own peers to teach our children” (Alumna, 2014). A redeveloped school repurposed into a multiuse facility focused on community needs would provide immediate gains to users from the local and regional community, as well facilitate impacts that address larger, systemic issues.

Conclusion

The use of Photolanguage provided a mechanism for a community engaged in a redevelopment process to develop a shared understanding of their motivations for redeveloping a blighted property, their visions for its reuse, and their roles in bringing their vision into being. Such shared understanding emerge through parallel processes: participation in a reflective process and through documentation and analysis of that process.

References

Better Evaluation. (2014). Photolanguage. Retrieved from <http://betterevaluation.org/evaluation-options/photolanguage>