Images of Literacy: Using Instagram to explore literacy practices in a study abroad field experience

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to explore how preservice teachers used photography as an expressive mode to document and understand literacy practices in a study abroad context. We elicited participant-produced photographs as a way to visually construct meaning. Instagram was used as a visual literacy tool to record and reflect on experiences as future literacy teachers.

Research questions:

In what ways can photography be used to visually construct meaning about literacy practices in an alternative field experience?

- o How do preservice teachers use Instagram as a tool to document and explore literacy in a study abroad experience?

- o In what ways can photography be used to elicit reflection and promote discourse of literacy practices?

Framework:

As we designed this study, we took the stance that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through interactions and experiences with the world in a particular time and place (Crotty, 1998). We viewed the process of capturing and sharing images with a digital photography app as a way for co-constructing multiple meanings about a unique experience. Photography has been shown to be an effective method to capture moments, enhance reflective thoughts, and heighten consciousness about an event or object through visual representations (Mendelson, 2008). Photographs have the ability to

"carry large amounts of information… that's difficult to represent in text alone" (Wagner, 2007, p. 47). Barthes (1978) describes the photograph as "complex concurrent messages" containing both a denoted message (common representation) and a connoted message (communicated by society). The photograph itself becomes more than an amalgamation of colors, shapes, and materials when the audience inserts their intentions and begin to impose their own codes and modes of meaning.

New photography apps designed to promote communication, collaboration, and sharing provide avenues to explore these modes of meaning. Instagram is an example of an app that promotes textual and visual dialogue and co-construction of meaning. In Instagram, textual composition is brief and the visual image or video is the primary source of meaning. Users can post photos or short video clips, attach hashtags and at-handles, compose captions, and respond to others. Many teacher education programs have adopted a digital space, such as a blog, website, or discussion board, as a connective tool to promote reflective and collaborative practices, support teacher identity, and document learning (Hanuscin, Cheng, Rebello, Sinha, & Muslu, 2014; Miller & Williams, 2013). Instagram is another tool that can be used in field experiences to create visuals, document experiences, and promote dialogue.

Methods and techniques:

This qualitative study occurred before and during an alternative study abroad field experience. We turned to a visual methodology to explore how pre-service teachers would use photography to access and understand literacy practices in a unique context. Participants included sixteen preservice teachers entering their final year in a teacher education program at a southeastern, research one university. Fourteen were elementary

education majors, one was an early childhood major, and one was in the Master of Arts in Teaching program. Our role was to facilitate seminars and provide technology support for participants.

We met with the participants in four seminars prior to departure to discuss the use of digital tools, literacy practices unique to the experience, and peer collaboration strategies as they related to the expectations of the experience. Following the tenets of visual methodology, we explained the importance of the visual representations, the conditions and context under which the image is captured, and the multiple ways of viewing an image (Rose, 2013). We explicitly discussed the use of visual literacy tools to reflect on experiences and moments as they related to literacy practices. During these pre-departure seminars, participants practiced using Instagram to compose and share images with appropriate captions and respond to other postings. During the four-week, intensive field experience, participants focused their reflections on literacy instruction; they posted a minimum of two images per week with a descriptive caption, and responded to peers. The image was used as an entry point into their thinking and reflection about the literacy practices during seminar discussions.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Data included Instagram artifacts (photos, captions, comments) from both the participants and the researchers and seminar transcripts. Preservice teachers used their own cameras or smartphones to take photographs in the field experience, representing literacy practices. We created a private Instagram page for use throughout the study. Visual data and captions were essentially displayed and interpreted as a photo-essay collection (Rose, 2013). The photo-essay "images [were] used actively in the research

process" as a representation of meaning (Rose, 2013). We also recorded seminars and captured our own images in Instagram as participants were using their photograph to discuss literacy practices and experiences. We posted seminar images with a caption describing what we were hearing and interpreting. This allowed us to connect the audio conversations with a photographic representation of the moment and invited our participants to add to our interpretation.

We analyzed the photo captions, field notes, and transcribed seminar discussions throughout the study. We began with the images and captions and used an inductive, open-coding process, whereby we looked across the photos and text and generated codes as they related to literacy (Saldana, 2012). Codes included feelings, practices, wonderings, and literacy tools. We invited participants to look at the codes and include their own input. We then organized the codes into emerging themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Next, we analyzed the data to uncover findings about the preservice teachers understanding and experiences and the role of photography during the process.

Preliminary Results:

Through images and captions, preservice teachers were able to extend their thinking, wonderings, and understandings about literacy practices as they engaged in seminar discussions.

Literacy Lesson Ideas. Instagram offered pre-service teachers a platform to share lesson ideas, receive feedback, and identify practices or tools they would like to remember when they have their own classrooms. During seminars, pre-service teachers expressed their desire to learn more about the posts of others while they were also able to refine their

knowledge based on the feedback of others. This allowed the pre-service teachers to serve as an expert, while benefiting from the expertise of their peers (Jenkins et al., 2006)

Literacy Lesson Reflection. Pre-service teachers utilized Instagram to reflect on their teaching practices in a space that encouraged others to continue the conversation and offer constructive feedback. Supporting each other as they improved literacy practice led to opportunities for inquiry and reflection on their own practice (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Emerging Themes

Seeing multiple literacies. Participants began to shift their thinking about literacy and literacy practices during the course of the study. Throughout the experience, we referred to Instagram as a visual literacy tool and photographs as another mode of communication and expression. Participants composed shots of digital literacy practices, which included various types of technology and social media tools. During seminar, we talked about how these tools were being utilized and whether or not they were transferable to their classrooms at home in the United States. This allowed for a discussion on Henry Jenkins' view that "our goals should be to encourage youth to develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture" (Jenkins, et al., p. 8).

Extending the conversation. The photographs provided participants with a way to represent their thinking and extend the conversation by providing a reminder of the experience, serving as a springboard for further conversations. This created a

participatory culture that allowed for community involvement in the literacy practices of our pre-service teachers (Jenkins et al., 2006). Participants added to the meaning with their own interpretations. One participant posted an image containing numbers. Initially, it was unclear what the numbers were, but in response to a comment, the pre-service teacher identified that it was the number to her classroom as she left on her last day. The image had personal significance to her and triggered both happiness in her growth as a literacy teacher during her time spent there and sadness that she would never return. Another pre-service teacher posted an image of the computer lab. During seminar she connected literacy practices with technology and described how students used the computers to compose letters.

Conclusion

Instagram photographs and captions were used as a research tool to investigate perceptions and conceptions of literacy practices. In our preliminary findings, we found that photographs promoted reflection, extended discussions, and elicited new ideas about literacy practices. Instagram provided a structure for the preservice teachers to clarify and contextualize the image through words and images. Furthermore, Instagram provided teacher educators with a virtual presence and insight into the weekly occurrences within the classroom. It allowed access to pre-service teacher thinking and was often used as a starting point during planning sessions, casual conversations, and seminar meetings. It did not, however, replace the physical role of the teacher educator within the field experience. Through ongoing analysis and refinement of our themes, we hope to uncover new insights into the ways we can utilize photography as a tool during field experiences.

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