COVID-19 Photovoice: Creating College Student Peer-to-Peer Support Groups with an Online Active Learning Assignment

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Abstract

This paper describes a photovoice project that created a peer-to-peer support community in online undergraduate sociology classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings suggest that participation in the photovoice project fostered the creation of a peer-to-peer social support system that assisted college students through a natural disaster because classmates could safely share coping strategies online. Data also suggests that this assignment provided an exceptional active learning experience for educating undergraduate sociology students about collective experiences and the importance of social support systems. Lastly, it also helped build students' research skills by showing them how a qualitative community-based participatory research method, photovoice, could help achieve positive research participant outcomes during the pandemic.

Keywords: College students, COVID-19, Photovoice, Social Support System, Online teaching pedagogy

Introduction

Due to the precarious COVID-19 pandemic that we live through, higher education teaching and learning strategies have shifted significantly to online learning. This paper addresses this seismic shift in higher education by providing a practical active learning assignment for online classes. As educators know, active learning helps foster students' engagement with course material and with one another, thus resulting in positive learning outcomes (Aloni and Harrington 2018). Active learning as a teaching method focuses the onus of learning on learners and assumes that students must do more than "listen" to learn – they must read, write, discuss, and/or be engaged in solving problems.

Several studies find active learning essential for higher-level learning (Meyer 2018). These studies also show that engagement and active learning in online classes is challenging to create. In this study, I ask if employing a photovoice assignment in an online course during COVID-19 helps facilitate active learning and builds a social support system for students in online classes. Photovoice is a qualitative participatory research method that involves participants taking photos to document and reflect upon issues and social phenomena that are important or meaningful to them (Woodgate, Zubra, and Tennent 2017). The participants collectively interpret the images they share with the group through group discussions. The narratives constructed in those group conversations explain how the photos reflect a research question or social phenomena that the researcher has asked them to document with photographs. Photovoice, however, is more than a community participatory research method. It has been adapted and used successfully as a pedagogical tool in K-12 and college classrooms (Teti et al. 2019). In the following pages, I will explain how using photovoice

in online classes provides students a location where they can share their thoughts about and experiences with COVID-19. In turn, this online interaction creates a platform where they can disclose coping strategies to mitigate the impacts of this natural disaster. Students create a peer-to-peer support community via the photovoice assignment by sharing their coping strategies, fears, frustrations, and hopes for the future via their photos and short narratives in a weekly discussion board forum. Therefore, photovoice empowers students to participate in a positive active learning activity with the course material and one another.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Visual Sociology

Before explaining photovoice as a research method and pedagogical tool, I must outline the history and the relationship between photography, research, and teaching in sociology because it will help us situate photovoice in the discipline. Let us begin with visual sociology, as it has aimed to standardize the use of visual images as a legitimate and pertinent type of data for sociological research (Healy and Moody 2014; Nathansohm and Zuev 2013; Zuev and Krase 2017). Visual sociologists study social reality through images and non-visual data, such as interviewing people who create, circulate, and interpret images. In a general sense, visual sociologists study data related to how the participants see the social world and those who make the images (Zuev and Krase 2017).

Valuable "insights about the beginnings of visual sociology can be gained from "Erving Goffman's conceptualization on encounters, ritual, interaction order, behavior in public places, and gender displays" (Zuev and Krase 2017:2). Goffman's work on gender advertisement and his visual analysis of modern media and impression management cannot be understated when thinking about the development of visual sociology. It can be asserted that the Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), where his core analysis explores the relationship between life and performance, helped establish the foundation of visual sociology. Other founding influences on this area of study come from Harold Garfinkel and his theoretical and methodological components that explore visual data analysis (Zuev and Krase 2017). Ethnomethodology's practice of visualization and seeing the participants' point of view and the contextual particulars of the social settings are suited to observing and investigating social practices as they naturally fit into visual sociology research (Ball and Smith 2011 in Zuev and Krase 2017). Another

founding scholar who could be said to have developed the area of visual sociology is Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his book Photography: A Middle-Brow Art (Bourdieu 1990). In this work, Bourdieu fundamentally sets up the development of visual sociology because the object of his interest was photographic practice and practices of visualization. As Zuev and Krase (2017:2-3) note, "Bourdieu finds how the photographic practice of family photos may increase group solidarity and suggests that people engaged in different types of photographic activities can delimit class boundaries." Visual sociology and the practice of analyzing photographs and cultural images have a long history in sociology.

Photovoice as Method

Photovoice was developed by Wang and Burris (1994) in the substantive area of Public Health. They used photovoice as a research method, where researchers provide cameras to participants to document concerns important to them. Participants take the photos and provide short narratives explaining their photo's meaning. Then they have conversations with other participants in the group where they share their photos, their concerns, and the short narratives explaining the meaning of their photos with one another. After that, participants often display their photos and brief narratives with a larger audience, such as community members and policymakers, where they generate dialogue with the aim of social change. The researchers' role in the photovoice project is to recruit participants to look at a specific concept/idea/concern, provide cameras, and facilitate meetings and discussions about the photos they took. After the meetings, the researchers can codify the emergent themes generated by the photos, collective narrative captions, and discussions. After that, they meet with the participants, where the findings are collectively agreed upon or expanded. Then, the research results and photos are shared with local community members, scholars, and policymakers.

Wang and Burris (1994) coined the term "photo novella," which later became known as photovoice. They implemented photo novella as a needs assessment related to Chinese women's health. In their study, the women were asked to photograph intangibles like "love" and "worry" by taking photos of these "things" with their cameras. It was soon realized that the photos alone were insufficient to understand these emotions. So, they recognized that along with the photograph (photo), a short personal narrative (novella) telling the story about the image was needed. Over time, photovoice became the preferred term for this research method. Wang and Burris (1994:179) noted that this process "provides

participants the opportunity to spin tales about their everyday lives." While the narratives about the photos are invaluable as narrative research, the photos make space for and are the vehicle for those stories.

Photovoice is a form of participatory action research; therefore, it is often community-based. Participants are actively interwoven into the research process; consequently, they are not passive subjects. Because they take the photos and create their narratives, they are co-researchers in these projects (Latz 2017). Photovoice aims at creating an environment in which participants give and get valid information, make free and informed choices (including the choice to participate), and generate an internal commitment to the results of their inquiry" (Argyris and Schon, 1991:86). Participants have a personal stake in the research findings. They are usually more interested in how it can be applied or shared with policymakers than how it might generate knowledge for knowledge's sake.

According to Sutton-Brown (2020:70), "[photovoice] oscillates between private and public worlds in its attempt to publicize and politicize personal struggle via photography, narratives, critical dialogue, and social action," which is in line with C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination. Marginalized groups have found photovoice extremely useful because it highlights their perspectives and experiences that are usually not heard by those in positions of power. For instance, Michell, Billiot, and Lechuga-Peña (2020) found that photovoice could be used to document environmental change and support Indigenous accounts of the decline in the quality of their life, illness, or disease experiences and the unwelcome cultural alterations that future generations will face. These communities used photos and short narratives to inform political stakeholders and local community members about environmental change and social, cultural, and political injustices. As a community-engaged research method, photovoice has been applied to various contexts, with a range of diverse populations and a variety of social justice initiatives. For example, it has been internationally employed with marginalized groups in South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania (Langa 2010). Specific issues, such as social solidarity (Kesse 2011), HIV/AIDS stigmatization (Teti et al. 2019), caregiving (Walker and Early 2010), and disadvantaged youths' understandings of their local communities and living environments (Douglas 2012), have been explored via photovoice.

One of the distinguishing features of photovoice is that "it aims to privilege community voice and, concordantly, local forms of knowledge, thereby fostering individuals and communities' agentic capacities" (Seedat, Suffla, and Bawa 2015:321). This line of inquiry is steeped within the legacy of Paulo Freire's (1970) work about critical consciousness. Freire (1970:83) argued that "people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world ... as a reality in the process, in transformation." From this stance, photovoice embraces the idea that individuals' narratives about their social realities are situated in the social structures of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and geographical location. Moreover, it asserts that their depictions of their social realities and intersectional affiliations are negotiated through culturally available forms of representation (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, and Pestronk 2004). Photovoice participants, therefore, symbolize their social realities through the photographs they take and the mean by which they engage others. The reflexive dialogue about their social conditions and social realities informs others about those conditions and works towards direct social change (Wang and Burris 1994).

Photovoice as a Pedagogical Tool

The photovoice method has been adapted as a beneficial teaching tool for stimulating experiential learning, critical thinking skills, and encouraging community engagement. Several attempts to apply this research methodology to boost learning in the classroom exist. For instance, this approach has been used with urban youth to teach writing in the K-12 system (Zenkov and Harmon 2009) and successfully engage autistic children in the classroom (Carnahan 2006). Photovoice is a useful pedagogical tool for college students, as well. One of the most important benefits of using photovoice with college students is that it helps students better understand how their power and privilege shape their everyday worlds (Manohar, Berkowitz, Wilder, and Tinkler 2013). Another college-level study demonstrating the impact of photovoice finds a positive impact this method has when developing students' self-awareness about their ability to impact their community and social policy (Chio and Fandt 2007).

Similarly, Warne, Snyder, and Gadin (2013) show how photovoice helped students actively shape a healthy school environment via their health promotion participation in that project. Gast and Whitney (2014) also implemented photovoice to assist health education students in understanding theories about health behaviors. Teti et al. (2019) demonstrated how using a photovoice project in their health science class increased students' empathy toward people living with HIV. However, another photovoice activity in the college classroom was used to bring awareness to

undergraduate students about the impact of social class and income levels on health (Massengale et al. 2016). Studies show how visual images reflect community life's social and cultural context, like short videos, documentaries, or stock photos often used in the classroom. We need to keep in mind that documentary makers or professional photographers often produce images shown in the classroom. There is no doubt that professional visual images impact students because these films also reflect the filmmaker or photographer's positionality, what they think to be important, or what they think will have the best reception to their work. On the other hand, photovoice enables students to create and collect images that are important to them. This approach provides them the space to use their voices and perspectives via the photos and short accompanying narratives they share with the rest of the class.

Moreover, students can connect their photos and the discussions about the meaning of those pictures to the course content they are learning. Several studies have used this approach and have successfully illustrated their attitudes and understandings about their school environment (Zenkov and Harmon 2009). Others have used photovoice to have college students engage in science and the scientific method in their communities (Cook and Quigley 2013). Kroeger et al. (2012) used photovoice to teach greater student diversity and foster a "critical stance" in higher education systems. Even college-level diversity issues have been explored using photovoice (Chio and Fandt 2007). Chio and Fandt (2007:489) found "that the process of taking, sharing and talking about photographs had value in that the subjective self (the 'I' of the photographer) was acknowledged, while the potential for anxiety related to sharing this self with others was reduced through the more objective 'eye' of the camera."

Photovoice as a pedagogical tool can be successfully used in online college courses. Studies have found that photovoice enriches students' educational experiences. It increases the relevance of the content to their everyday experiences while also creating a community by encouraging students to collaborate with their peers. Edwards et al. (2012) found that students found photovoice "had a positive influence on course interactions, but also on their sense of community, comfort in the educational milieu, and on how well they got to know themselves, other learners, and the instructor" (p. 103). Another online course that used photovoice as a pedagogical tool helped graduate students to think critically and use a different medium for knowledge creation beyond the formal interview or survey research method (Schell et at. 2009). In this study, I have adopted photovoice as a pedagogical tool for three reasons: it

promotes student engagement in the classroom (Chio and Fandt 2007); it motivates and empowers students to actively participate in their learning process [active learning] (Cook and Buck 2010), and it is a means through which to build rapport and community between students and their teachers (Whitfield and Meyer 2005).

One final note about the benefits of using photovoice in the classroom is that it is in line with the American Sociological Association (ASA) mandate that is expressed by Manohar when they state "that undergraduate student learning outcomes should involve an 'understanding of how an individual's experience can vary by race, class, gender, and other social statuses" (2013:37). A challenge for educators is to be innovative with curricular design and pedagogical techniques when attempting to reach this goal. Photovoice is one such tool to help with that endeavor. I will show in this paper how photovoice can present real-life experiences from diverse populations and be a window into how students experience a variety of social locations that they may not otherwise be exposed to. More specifically, I will show how students with diverse backgrounds express the various COVID-19 coping strategies used during this pandemic.

Photovoice and Online Student Peer-to-Peer Support Community

We, as educators, understand that students do not learn in a void. Learning is very much a social event. Many teachers, therefore, design their classes to center on community-building activities with their students. While there are many methods used for both community-building and active learning in online and traditional classes, I will focus on the power of the online discussion board because it is the location where active learning and community-building happen in this project. The discussion board is where photos are posted, short narratives explaining the meaning of those photos are discussed, and it is where active learning and student engagement with each other occurs. Studies have shown the benefits of discussion board activities and assert that it keeps students involved with the class content, connected, and engaged in the course (Aloni and Harrington 2018). In this context, course engagement is understood as "the ability to hold the attention of an individual or to induce the individual to participate in some sort of activity" (Meares 2013:1). On the other hand, student engagement is understood as "the students' psychological investment in an effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newman 1992:12). Researchers have found

"that student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses" (Martin and Bollinger 2018:206).

Student engagement is one of the keys to successful online learning. Studies find that students' cognitive development and ability to construct knowledge led to higher class completion rates and greater student success (Britt, Goon, and Timmerman 2015; Angelino, Williams, and Natvig 2007). Moreover, research shows that those students interacting with their peers, course content, and the instructor help the online learner to become much more active and engaged in the course overall (Lear, Ansorge, and Steckelberg 2010). In their "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" to help foster student engagement, Chickering and Gamson (1999) found students to be more engaged in the course when instruction:

1. Increases the interaction between student and faculty.
2. Provides chances for students to work in cooperation with others.
3. Promotes students' use of active learning strategies.
4. Provides timely feedback on students' academic advancement.
5. Requires students to spend quality time on educational tasks.
6. Establishes high standards for acceptable academic work.
7. Addresses various learner needs in the learning process.

These seven principles have become the dominant paradigm for developing standards of teaching and learning in higher education. Current researchers frequently cite these in both traditional face-to-face and online education. Online teaching scholars have added to these seven principles by identifying three types of successful interactions in online classes: (1) learner-to-learner, (2) learner-to-instructor, and (3) learner-to-content interactions (Moore 1993). Studies find that interactions with instructors, peers, and content help online learners become more engaged in the course and more active in their learning (Lear et al. 2010).

Learner-to-learner interaction is beneficial for online learning because it leads to student engagement, preventing boredom and isolation in online classes. It is, therefore, essential to create learning environments where course activities promote student engagement. Activities should assist students in feeling connected to the instructor, class content, and classmates and promote all three types of interactions mentioned above. The end goal should create a dynamic sense of community and possibilities for interaction with others in the online class. Traditional technologies for engaged learning, such as discussion boards, blogs, chats, group work, peer assessments, and wikis, have effectively promoted student-to-student interactions (Revere and Kovach 2011; Banna et al. 2015). Twitter feeds, Google Groups, YouTube, Flip Grid, and other web-based applications improve student-to-student engagement in online courses. Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz, and Swan (2001) found that when a sizable proportion of the course grade was centered on discussions, students were much more likely to be satisfied with the course, and they believed they learned more in the class.

Photographs record visual content, but these images can facilitate discussions. The students' visual interpretations and meanings assigned to the photographs are crucial parts of the photovoice process. The practice of group storytelling and social interactions via these online discussion board discussions enables them to explore the diverse experiences of those social phenomena presented in the photo while also creating community with one another via the collective co-construction of knowledge of that object under consideration. Learning about a subject in an online community of learners will enhance students' reflexive skills and articulate and represent their views, concerns, and insights in visual and narrative form. "The images created through the photovoice process also invite learners to take the lead in their own learning" (Sitter 2018:215); Hagedorn (1994:47) also states that photographs "invite people to take the lead in inquiry, facilitating their discussions of an experience."

Community: Online Student Social Support Systems

Peer social support can help alleviate psychological distress and negative academic self-perception among students and help improve academic performance (Yukari et al. 2014). Numerous studies indicate that social support is essential for maintaining bodily and mental health. We know poor social support negatively affects mental illness, as recorded in studies across disciplines (Ozbay et al., 2008). Social supports moderate hereditary and environmental vulnerabilities and can provide resilience in persons experiencing stressful events. This process is explained by the buffering hypothesis, which suggests students are protected from the harmful effects of stress if they have social support systems (Cruza-Guet et al. 2008). The buffering hypothesis states that psychosocial stress will harm the health and well-being of those

with little to no social support. In contrast, these stressful effects will be reduced or eliminated for those with robust social support systems (Cruza-Guet et al. 2008). Cohen and Wills (1985) were the first to define combinations of stressors and social support; they proposed a model for how social support has a buffering effect. Amongst the types of social support described by them (i.e., tangible, appraisal, and emotional [self-esteem, belonging] support), appraisal and emotional support are most applicable to students facing poor academic performance and psychological stress (Yukari et al. 2014). When a person experiences psychological distress, appraisal support can buffer that stress by changing either one's opinion of the threat or their capacity to cope with that stressor. By comparison, emotional support to raise one's self-esteem is needed when a student experiences poor academic performance as a stressor. For both types of social support, an ideal source of support could come from others who have experienced, or are facing, an identical or comparable situation (Yukari et al. 2014). Based on this research, I contend that social support from peers at a southern liberal arts university taking online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic could buffer students' stressors by participating in active learning assignments, such as this photovoice project.

The Photovoice Project

The photovoice assignment is centered on three fundamental premises: 1) the combination of visual and narrative representations is a powerful means for people to communicate about their lived experiences and perceptions of their social worlds; 2) the prominence placed on lived experiences helps to uncover specific social phenomena that emerge in a collective group, and 3) the focus on local settings within which they live and interact with others contributes in understanding the social context where these ideas and local knowledge emerge. Visual and narrative illustrations are valuable methods for eliciting ways to communicate their lived experiences and views of their social worlds (Wilkin and Liamputtong 2010).

This article focuses on using photovoice as an active learning activity in an online course to develop an online peer-to-peer social support system for college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were asked to take photos that capture their everyday realities and the strategies they use to cope with family life, college classes, work demands, and various other stressors during the pandemic in the spring of 2020. After taking their photos and posting them on an online course discussion board, students were required to provide a short narrative about the meanings of the photos and how they represented whatever concern they were addressing for the week. They had to choose a concern from a set of questions listed below. After posting their photos and short narratives for the week, students were required to comment upon one of their peers' photos and short narratives.

The photovoice process included participants selecting from predetermined COVID-19 topics they wanted to address each week. There were five topical questions; below are the instructions students followed:

> Please take and post 3-5 photos per week on the discussion board to address the questions below. Alternatively, take one photo addressing each of the five questions per week.
>
> 1.   Take pictures of things you do to help you cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. What things are helpful for your "self-care?"
> 2.   Take pictures of your support system and resources that you find helpful.
> 3.   Take pictures of how this pandemic has changed your and your family's life.
> 4.   Take pictures of the biggest challenges that you face on a day-to-day basis.
> 5.   While you cannot change the pandemic, take pictures of what your hopes and dreams are now.

Students were then instructed to include the following narrative information with each photo:

> After uploading your photos, make sure to include the following information with each picture.
> •   Which question from the above list is related to the picture?
> •   Date picture was taken:
> •   What is this picture of?
> •   Write down a couple of sentences or paragraphs about why you took this photo. What does it mean to you?

Methods and Sample

This study is grounded in a qualitative research methodology and centers on teaching and learning as a worthwhile and timely inquiry. In this study, I used photovoice methodology for data generation to explore an array of students' COVID-19 photographic representations and students' narratives about their coping strategies during the pandemic. I employed a discussion board forum where students would share

their photos and short narratives about the meanings of the photos with their peers in an online course format. Photovoice is a participatory action research method where participants use a camera to generate an image-based account for analysis (Wang and Burris 2004). The combined photo sharing in the discussion board provided an environment for "data generation and initial meaning-making of that data" (Latz 2017:58) through a form of questioning called photo-elicitation (Collier 1957). Participants respond to their images by attributing personal and social meanings, beliefs, and values to the photos. In this study, participants generated new photos each week shaped by the researcher's question prompts. The questions remained the same for the six weeks this activity was assigned (see Appendix A).

I used a narrative approach and thematic analysis when interpreting the data. The narrative analysis involves the identification of the ways that participants talk and make meaning about social phenomena with each other (Holstein and Gubrium 2011). I focused on examining how students talked (writing) about coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and online learning. I analyzed their narratives by coding the photo description data and finding the recurring themes that emerged. This narrative analysis coding allowed me to focus on the language used to describe their experiences, thoughts about the online class, and their broader personal practices to cope with the pandemic. The thematic analysis involves counting how many times particular images emerged in the data after you have closely examined the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that repeatedly come up (Vaismoradi 2013). I did not change any spelling or grammatical errors in their narratives because I wanted to remain true to their voices and the data. This approach is centered on letting the participant's voices speak for themselves.

The participants for this study were college students from five sociology courses. Two courses began the semester online, and three courses were traditional face-to-face on-campus classes that moved to online learning mid-semester. The original face-to-face classes had eight weeks of in-person instruction, then switched to eight weeks of online instruction after stay-at-home orders were issued due to the pandemic. All the classes were at the undergraduate level and housed within a sociology department – one class was a Race and Ethnicity class (N=15), two were Gerontology courses (N=29), and two were in the substantive area of Health Inequalities (N=21). A total of sixty-five (N=65) students participated in this project. Students were all from a mid-sized, southern, liberal arts university – 93% were 18-24 years old, and the racial composition was 90% White, 6% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 3% African American. I use

pseudonyms for all students in this photovoice project. It was implemented at the mid-point of the semester after the face-to-face class transitioned to fully online instruction due to the pandemic. This activity was a voluntary six-week assignment where students could earn ten points of extra credit for their full weekly photovoice participation. IRB (internal review board) approval was granted for this study, and protocols for photovoice from recruitment to dissemination were taken by the PI (primary investigator), such as not taking or archiving photos of peoples' faces, objects, or places that might make it possible to identify any individual. Students who participated in this project signed consent forms explaining the study and asked permission to use their photos in publishable research articles.

Results

The following findings show that participation in the photovoice project fostered the creation of a peer-to-peer social support system, which could positively assist students through the COVID-19 natural disaster and the transition to online learning. Taking photos, narrating those photos, then sharing that information with their peers provided students with an active learning assignment where they collectively shared their stressors, fears, worries, accomplishments, and coping strategies with one another. The three themes that emerged from the data are

The first week that the COVID-19 photovoice project began, students started discussing how to create spaces to work at home due to a mandatory shutdown of university library spaces, local coffee shops, and study spaces on campus. A large number of photos of makeshift offices and piles of books that students had to read were shared, indicating the stress of this transition to online or home-only workspaces. Most of these photos and comments shared in the first week of the discussion board are below.

Image 1: Textbooks

After sharing a picture of her textbooks and notebook with her peers, Melissa stated, "this represents all my classes are online, and it is tough because I am needing to do more work on my own now at home…."

Image 2: Reading for Class

Jessica stated, "so much reading now. It is hard to keep up with all the classes now that are online and alone. I used to do some of this in the library with my friends" after sharing a photo of all the books she was assigned in her classes for the semester. Interestingly, students had these books and readings before moving online due to the pandemic. Similar photos and accompanying comments from their peers indicated how difficult students were finding the transition to online work, studying in their bedrooms or apartments, dealing with the workload/amount of reading assigned in their classes, and the isolation they felt away from their peers and the weekly routine of classroom lectures. To highlight this, look at what Kennedy stated. She said,

> I am having concerns about how schooling online and possible online clinicals will go. Part of me believes I will not succeed since I tend to learn better one-on-one and in person. I am stressed on a daily basis about this situation, but I am hopeful it will be fine as we are all trying to get through the online learning process.

To help mitigate the stress and isolation of working alone at home, most students shared photos of their new home offices and study spaces. Melissa explained that her way to cope with transitioning from a traditional campus learning environment to an online one was to create a new home office in a craft room so she could focus on her studies and online learning.

**Image 3: Melissa's Workspace**

Melissa stated,

> Before classes began online, I took a picture of my workspace. This workspace proved to take up many hours of my day. Getting to my workspace and focusing on my computer for hours at a time proved to be one of my biggest daily challenges. I sincerely miss the privilege of in-person classes but creating this space to work helped me through this tough time.

Another challenge many struggled with was getting out of bed and finding the motivation to work on their coursework.
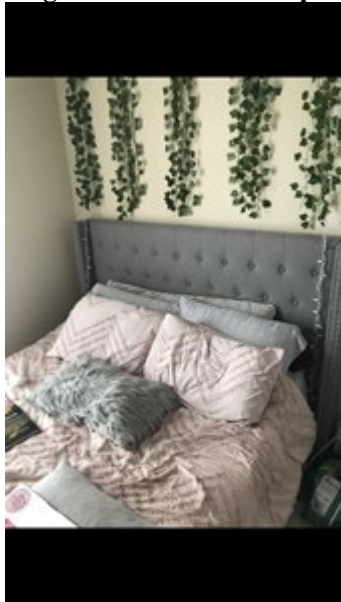
Image 4: Lauren's Workspace
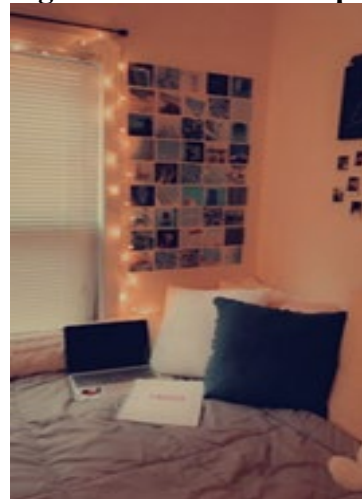
Lauren stated,

> This is a picture of my bed at my apartment. I have really struggled to find the motivation to do anything since being in quarantine. It takes me forever to get out of bed and start my day. It is tough to get out of bed when there is not much to look forward to.

Image 5: Olivia's Workspace

Similarly, Olivia wrote,

> This is a photo of my bed in my apartment. I took this photo because, with the pandemic, my biggest challenge is to get myself out of bed, make it, and get my day going. It has been hard with the isolation to find any motivation, so on days like today, when I can get out of bed and make it, I am very content with myself.

Katherine also commented about motivation when she posted the photo below. She explained,

> This photo is of my roommate and me getting on our floor zoom call. The most challenging thing for me on a day-to-day basis is finding the motivation to do my schoolwork and focus on it. Because we do not have in-person classes, it has been difficult for me to adjust to online learning…

Image 6: Katherine's Workspace
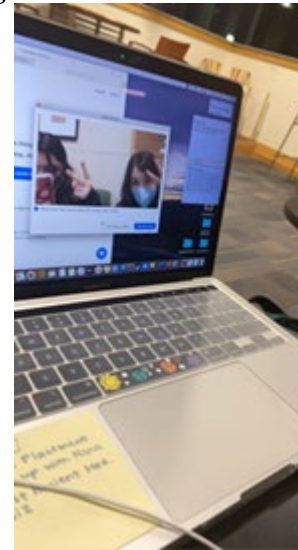
It is evident from their photos and comments above that traditional on-campus, in-person college students had a challenging time switching to online learning. After the first week of the transition to online learning, students quickly started creating a peer social support system and developing coping strategies that assisted them through this natural disaster. Students would highlight the importance of focusing on their career goals and studies in their posts. They also commented on the stress of working all day long on their studies and the need to keep organized with a planner and designated place to do their work. The photovoice project provided them with an active learning activity where they could share their coping strategies in a safe online environment, stay engaged in the online course format, and learn from one another. Some day-to-day coping strategies that emerged as common themes were creating a weekly goal list in their planners, spending time with family in the evening watching television or cooking dinner together, working out, walking outside with their pets, cuddling with their family pets, or creating art pieces – painting, sewing, or coloring in adult coloring books. These specific coping strategies will be explored in another article. This paper's focus is to highlight the value of the COVID-19 photovoice project as a pedagogical tool in the online sociology classroom and how a peer-to-peer social support system emerged. Students found the photovoice project extremely helpful because it mitigated their stressors while taking an online class during the pandemic. Moreover, the photovoice active learning activity kept them engaged with the course and one another. Some of the student's concluding thoughts about the project are below.

Using Photovoice to Learn Coping Strategies

Two examples of students' writing about learning coping mechanisms from their peers' posts. According to Mary,

> The Photovoice COVID-19 support group has been very helpful. It was nice to see all the neat things our fellow classmates were doing to cope during such an unprecedented time. A project like this is excellent because one communicates with others outside their usual circle. Seeing that everyone is going through the same thing and learning new ways to operate within the "new normal" was and is much needed.

Likewise, Tasha said,

> This activity was very helpful to me. It allowed me to see that we all as a class were going through the current changes together and many of us in some of the same ways. I got a few ideas from some of my peers that helped me cope with being cooped up in the house for so long. I was also able to share some of my thoughts about my current situation with my senior and how I am trying to deal with it. That has been pretty helpful to me.

Peer-to-Peer Support

The following are three examples of students discussing peer support (in addition to the quotes above). Miriam stated,

> I am also glad that we had the opportunity to participate within this COVID-19 support group. I viewed this discussion thread as so much more. Seeing everyone's weekly postings during this pandemic has allowed me to better cope with all the change that has taken place. Additionally, reading everyone's weekly posts have given me a laugh, some joy, and genuine happiness during such a crazy and unknown time.

Anna said,

> I feel that this discussion board has given us a reality of the impact the COVID-19 has brought into our world. "The new normal." We now see what everyone is going through in this time of pandemic. I love this photovoice discussion board and the closeness we get to feel with others.

Elaine wrote,

> I would definitely say this activity was helpful during this pandemic! It made me realize that we truly are all in this together and each going through our own things in life right now. This activity made me realize we should never take for granted our normal life schedules and enjoy the family time we are given now! I hope you all stay safe. It was nice getting to know you all outside of our usual discussion boards, lol! Sending love!

Engagement with Peers and Course

Two students fully engaged with their peers and this photovoice peer-to-peer support group explained how this project provided them with much-needed interactions with their peers. Mary responded, saying, "I do think this was a great way to cope with the pandemic. It was nice to engage with peers through their photos. I hope all of you and your families continue to stay safe and healthy."

Jessica believed the project was helpful and gave her something to look forward to during the week because she could connect with her peers and found it to be a form of social support. In her last post, she wrote:

> This is a bittersweet post as I am happy to get some more "me" time with the semester ending, but I have enjoyed discussing life as we currently know it with everyone in the class! This activity has been so helpful for me for many reasons. First, it allowed me to see that everyone here is experiencing a sense of chaos and lack of control too (we are all alone, together, right?). But also, I got a lot of great ideas for self-care and fun activities to do at home! I looked forward to posting each week and enjoyed reading about everyone's experiences.

Mental Health and Buffering COVID-19 Stressors

Two examples of students who wrote about how the photovoice project helped with mental health and examples of "buffering" come from Shelby and Ian. Shelby expressed that the photovoice project discussion space was "safe and positive, and it allowed me to cope emotionally with the pandemic. This discussion has also made me feel less alone with the feelings I have had concerning the changes that have occurred because of the pandemic."
Ian asserted that "this activity was very therapeutic for me. I really enjoyed being able to observe how

everyone is handling this pandemic. I was able to pick up some ideas and share some of my own. It was interesting to get a peek at all of your lives. Another bonus is that I almost never think about taking pictures, but now that I have started the habit, I am going to continue it. Thank you to everyone for sharing your lives, and best wishes to you all!"

Shelby and Ian's narratives show how the buffering hypothesis works in these social interactions and using photovoice in the online classroom. The buffering hypothesis suggests that students are protected from the harmful effects of stress if they have social support systems (Cruza-Guet et al. 2008). It also states that psychosocial stress will harm the health and well-being of those with little to no social support. In contrast, these stressful effects will be reduced or eliminated for those with robust social support systems (Cruza-Guet et al. 2008).

Conclusion and Discussion

Visual methods are woefully underutilized in the college classroom. Given how visually rich this generation of Instagram-posting students is, it seems reasonable that they would be particularly receptive to visual pedagogical tools like photovoice. This particular COVID-19 project found that photovoice helped students connect during a pandemic and aided in their creating a peer-to-peer social support group. Students were able to empathize with one another and share their worries, stressors, and concerns in their peer-to-peer support groups. Photovoice also helped keep students engaged in the course and with one another.

The stress of transitioning to online learning and needing to create a space where they could study/complete their work was a theme that emerged in the first couple of weeks of this project. Students shared photos of their books and newly created home offices and commented on the need to focus on their work and career goals. In the midweeks of this activity, most students commented on how difficult it was to get out of bed and complete their studies because they lacked incentives. They also stated that family and friends initially met their emotional and social needs. However, many students found it challenging to keep motivated with their class assignments and course readings because their families could not understand their workload or the class content they were studying. By participating in the photovoice project, most stated that their psychological and social needs were being met because they could share their stressors and coping strategies with one another. These coping strategies became tools for students to remain engaged with their courses and one another, thus providing a level of

advocacy, social support, and positive personal and professional outcomes, such as completing the course.

The narratives associated with the photos the students shared show that they face multiple challenges that could hinder the successful completion of their academic goals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Every student expressed the importance of family support during quarantine. They also all expressed the importance of the COVID-19 photovoice assignment in helping them not becoming extremely depressed or checking out the class. These peer-to-peer classmate relationships nurtured their motivations, clarified their aspirations, provided hope for the future, and helped them succeed in their courses and academic/professional goals. The buffering hypothesis claims that social support can be crucial to buffering stress and adverse impacts from stressful circumstances. Social support and coping strategies shared between the students in this project buffered the impact of the pandemics' stressful events, helped minimize adverse reactions to online learning, and helped remedy any maladaptive behavior in the aftermath of these stressful events.

Engaging students in a photovoice project during the 2020 COVID-19 online transition, I witnessed students' immediate needs being positively impacted by the interpersonal relationships students were developing with this active learning pedagogical tool. A genuine sense of care for one another and emotional support was evident. Classmates posted photos of their different coping strategies with one another, sharing pictures of art, yoga, cooking, families, and their pets. Students were overwhelmed with fear of the unknown, especially if they had never taken an online class. They shared pictures of their stack of books and cluttered dining room tables filled with half-completed end-of-term final papers. Their photos inform us that learners want their academic activities and educational endeavors to be active and reflective, enabling them to think deeply with one another and to have their voices and experiences heard. Their short narratives and photos encouraged students to pursue their motivations to attain their degrees and learn the material. This was especially important during this pandemic because there was/is anxiety over their futures. They need to rediscover what they are doing in college, why learning the material in the course matters, and why they should continue to invest in the cost, time, and personal sacrifices they make while attending college.

This active learning activity fostered a supportive peer-to-peer community. With this photovoice project, sincere concern for each other and bonds developed. Student-centered active learning typically denotes forms of instruction that give students opportunities to take the lead with their learning, participate in active

student-led discussions, a chance to design their learning projects, explore subjects that interest them, and contribute to the design of their courses (Wright 2011). Innovative pedagogical approaches like photovoice can transform learning because students discover their agency and community with this type of assignment. With this photovoice online activity, I was also able to teach sociology students about the importance of community building, the research method of photovoice, and the importance of peer-to-peer support groups during COVID-19. Sharing photos of their COVID-19 experiences and their short narratives about those photos was undeniably a valuable active learning experience for all who participated in this activity.

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Appendix A. Worksheet for Taking Pictures and Posting to Discussion Board for Photovoice Project

Use this weekly worksheet to post your pictures in the discussion board support group.

Please take and post 3-5 photos per week on the discussion board to address one of the questions below. Alternatively, take one photo addressing each of the five questions per week.

1. Take pictures of things you do that help you cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. What things are helpful for your "self-care?"
2. Take pictures of your support system and resources that you find helpful.
3. Take pictures of how this pandemic has changed your and your family's life.
4. Take pictures of the biggest challenges that you face on a day-to-day basis.
5. While you cannot change the pandemic, take pictures of what your hopes and dreams are now.

After uploading your photos, include the following information in each picture.

- What question(s) from the list above is related to the picture?
- Date picture was taken:
- What is this picture of?
- Write down a couple of sentences or paragraphs about why you took this photo. What does it mean to you?

After posting your pictures for the week, please respond to other participants' pictures/comments for the week. You must partake in the discussion board at least twice a week because this is a significant part of this research. This activity is used as a therapeutic intervention – creating a support group – where we foster a supportive discussion between people experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.