

7th Annual Emerging
African Researcher
Training Academy
2026



VISUAL METHODOLOGIES (PHOTO-VOICE & DIGITAL STORYTELLING)

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Contents



- Welcome and overview of the session
- Brief introduction to photovoice and digital storytelling
- Practical activity: co-creating photo and digital stories
- Discussion
- Closing reflections (+ evaluation)

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Learning objectives

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- Understand the **principles, applications and ethical considerations** of photovoice and digital storytelling as common participatory visual research methods (PVMs)
- **Design and implement** the basic components of a digital story or photovoice project
- Critically reflect on the use of **images and video clips in knowledge (co-) production** (including personal, found or AI generated)
- **Sources:** HSRC projects, handbook by Gillian Black and Mary Chambers (2019)



Your journey with participatory visual methods

1. What brings you to this session on participatory visual methods (Photovoice and Digital Storytelling)?
2. Which participatory visual methods have you used?

Share your response using:

- Menti: [menti.com](https://www.menti.com)
Code 4664 6997
- Or use this link:
<https://www.menti.com/alevgnz3g7e>

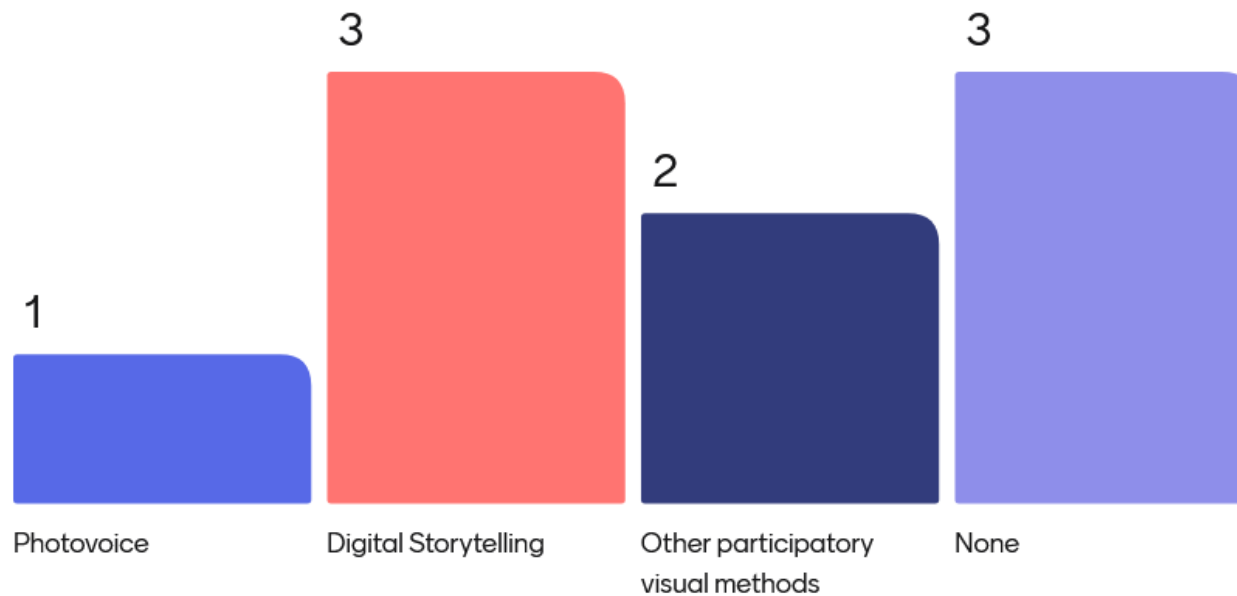


Scan me!

What brings you to this session on participatory visual methods (photovoice and digital storytelling)?



Which participatory visual methods have you used?



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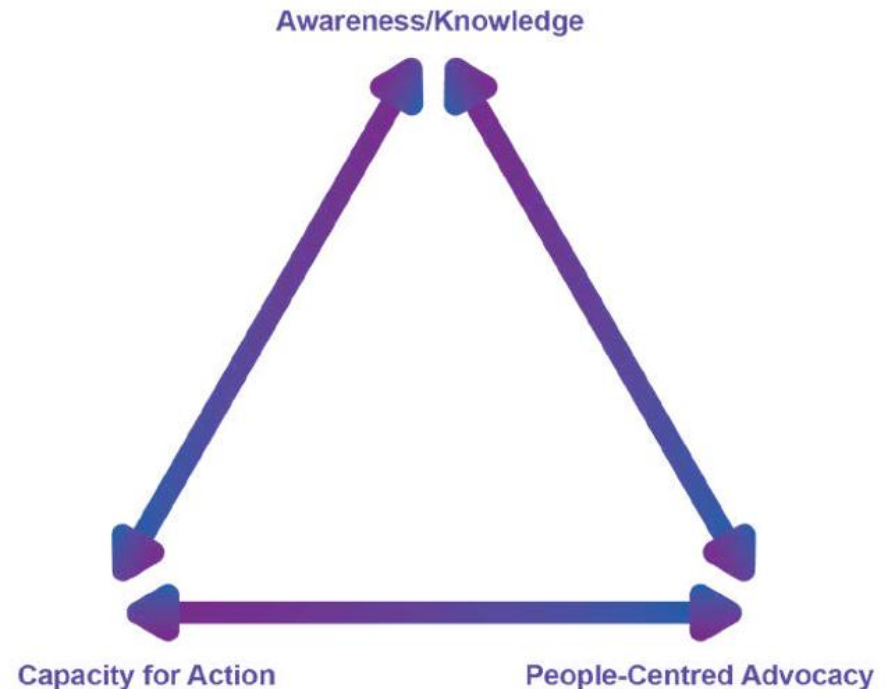
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPATORY VISUAL METHODS (PVMs)

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What are participatory visual methods?

- A range of **techniques** that involve people – often community members – in the production of **creative outputs that are used to express their views, ideas, experiences, and knowledge.**
- Participatory action research – designed to **empower people** to express themselves in ways that do not rely on written or verbal language alone.
- Well-established in health research, **growing in popularity as a research method** in other fields



Three central aims of PVM in the context of research
(Black and Chambers, 2019, adapted from Plush, 2009)



Art to Stimulate Engagement



Picture Card Games



Participatory Photo Postcards

Participatory Art



Performing Arts



Body Mapping

Photovoice / Participatory Photography



Digital Storytelling (DST)



Participatory & Collective Film-Making



• **Art to Stimulate Engagement**

- Uses art created by professional artists to initiate discussions and encourage reflection on specific topics.

• **Picture Card Games**

- Involves using sets of picture cards as prompts to facilitate dialogue and collective learning about health issues.

• **Participatory Art**

- Participants create their own art to express and reflect on experiences, with the process of creation being more important than the final artistic quality.

• **Body Mapping**

- Individuals create life-size outlines of their bodies and fill them with images and text to represent their experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to health and well-being.

• **Performing Arts**

- Utilises various forms of performance like drama, comedy, music, or dance to communicate health messages, promote activism, or explore social inequalities.

• **Photovoice / Participatory Photography**

- Participants use cameras to take photographs that represent their lives, communities, or specific situations, often to document strengths, challenges, or spark dialogue.

• **Digital Storytelling (DST)**

- A creative process where individuals use digital technology to combine static images (photos, drawings) with a first-person narrative to tell a short, personal story.

• **Participatory and Collective Film-Making**

- Groups learn to produce their own videos to explore and describe shared experiences, serving as powerful communication and advocacy tools.

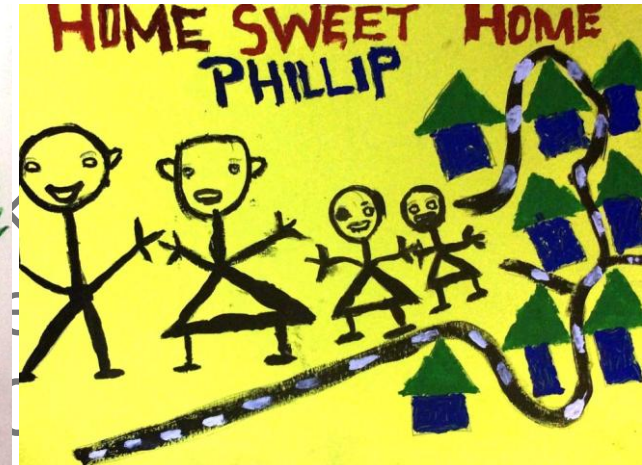
• **Participatory Photo Postcards**

- Researchers use sets of photographs as visual prompts to engage public and community groups in conversations, often comparing researchers' perspectives with community perceptions.



Photovoice and digital storytelling

Design: Arts-based, storytelling



What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear "story"?





Inside a photovoice and digital storytelling workshop

- 3 to 5 days
- Interactive
- Group interaction
- Similar to focus groups but with emphasis on co-learning and co-production of research outputs
- One-on-one support - guided process of creating individual/group stories
- Fun
- Arts – tell your story through drawing, painting, clay work, song, digital illustrations (your choice!)

What is photovoice?

Photovoice is a PVM which **enables people to represent and bring recognition to the places where they live and their priorities for change**, by taking photographs and reflecting on them - with captions.



HAPPY
Gerrit Louw

Photovoice has three main goals:

(1) Help **people record and REFLECT** on their community's strengths and concerns

(2) **Promote critical dialogue and learning** about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs (e.g. intended or unintended changes)

(3) Reach wider community audiences, **RESEARCHERS** and **decision makers**. Gets their attention!

Powerful advocacy tool - well-developed in community development and popular in health research



Photo-voice process



Source: Adapted from Lorenz (2005)
<http://www.lslorenz.com/currentphotovprojects.htm#photovpath>



Photovoice – key steps – 3 to 5 days

1. **Introduction and consent**
2. **Camera skills training** – you're training participants in basic photography (lighting, ethics, etc.), drafting captions and collective thematic analysis
3. **Taking photos with meaning** – that convey responses to the guiding prompt
4. **Group discussion and analysis** – individual reflection and collective process
5. **Captioning and preparing for dissemination**
6. **Visual: group reviewing printed photo-stories**





Taking photos with meaning – convey responses to the guiding prompt





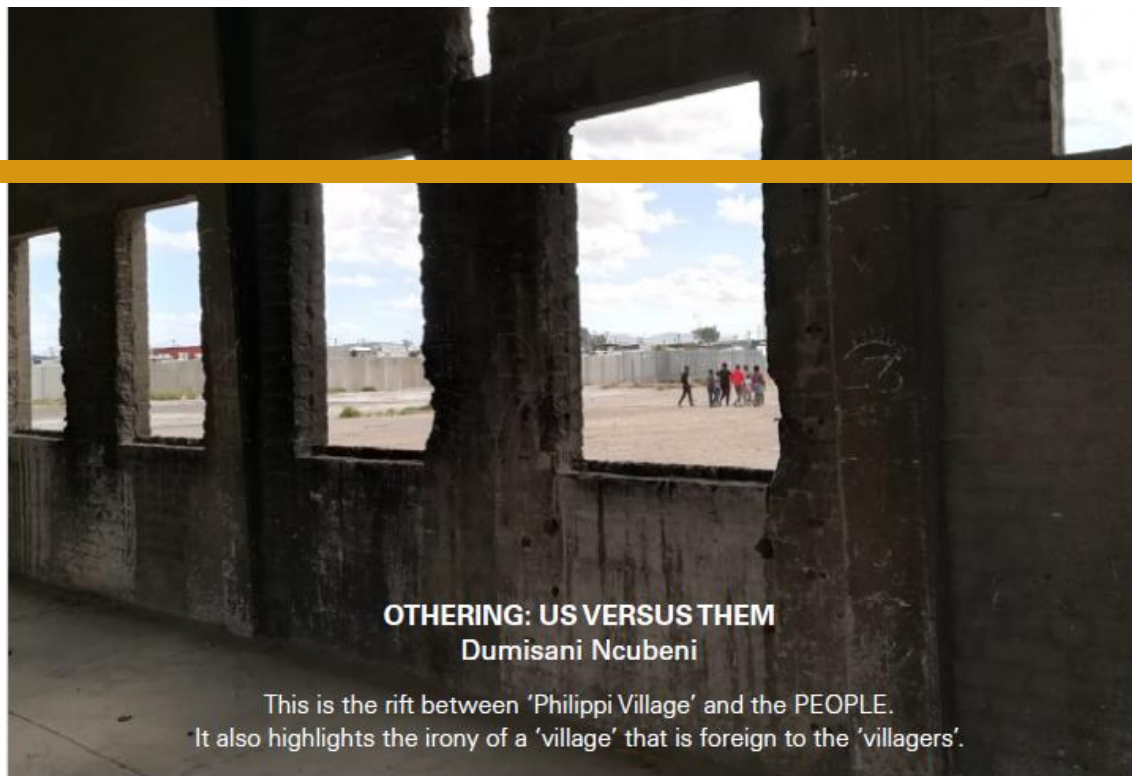
Photo-story example: 'photo' with caption



THIS IS PHILIPPI Sinazo Peter

This is what we see about Philippi.
It's kind of busy, but at the same time there's that fancy life hidden in Philippi.
Philippi can be beautiful if you dig deeper.





OTHERING: US VERSUS THEM

Dumisani Ncubeni

This is the rift between 'Philippi Village' and the PEOPLE.
It also highlights the irony of a 'village' that is foreign to the 'villagers'.

*[[Tourists or whoever visits Philippi
get scared. They don't feel safe. They feel
sorry for people in Philippi. That's how
I see the Philippi Innovation Hub.
To me, it's like a tourist that
came out of nowhere.]]*

- Sinazo Peter



Photovoice exhibitions





Sharing the outputs - Photovoice booklets

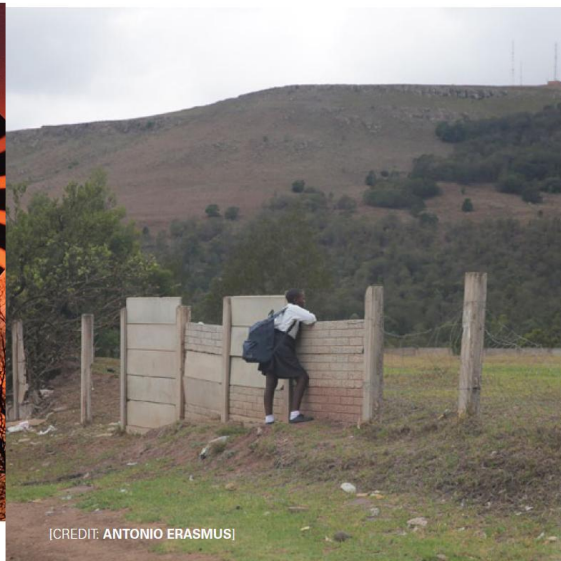
CARNARVON, HOSPITALITY AND THE SKA



[CREDIT: RIAAN DE WEE]

A visual storytelling reflection on challenges, strengths and opportunities for building local capabilities

ICT FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN COFIMVABA



[CREDIT: ANTONIO ERASMUS]

A visual storytelling reflection on challenges, strengths and opportunities for building local capabilities

PHILIPPI AND THE INNOVATION HUB



[CREDIT: IL-HAAM PETERSEN]

A visual storytelling reflection on challenges, strengths and opportunities for building local capabilities



Digital storytelling – From image to narrative

What happened here?



Why has this moment stayed with you?



In digital stories, voice not only tells a vital narrative but it also captures the essence of the narrator, their unique character, and their connection to the lived experience' (Lambert, 2010: 18)

What changed because of it?



What meaning do you now give it?





Stories as Research Data?

Example Question: Why did you pursue tertiary education?





Which response gives us a story?

Example Question: Why did you pursue tertiary education?

Reason

“I pursued tertiary education because I wanted to improve my employment opportunities and create a better future for myself and my family.”

Experience

“I remember standing outside the school office with my final results folded inside my blazer pocket. Around me, people were talking about university applications. I had not applied anywhere...”

Ethical and practical considerations in choosing between photovoice and digital storytelling...



Which method?

- Existing **skills** within your team
- Social and cultural **context** of the community and the target audience for the visual outputs (e.g., age, literacy, preferred media)
- **Research topic** (e.g., community development, individual journeys)
- **Individual vs collective processes**
- Other **practical considerations**: budget, team size, access to equipment

Feature	Photovoice	Digital storytelling
Format	Still images with captions	Short video clips (3 or 4 min)
Process	Often collective	Usually individual
Output	Posters/Exhibits	Multimedia films
Equipment	Cameras	Audio recording, editing software
Engagement	Group discussion	Personal reflection



What else to consider?

- **Group size:** Manageable with up to 15 people (photovoice, if you have big enough team); smaller (5-10) for methods needing space or one-to-one time.
- **Participant mobilisation:**
 - PVMs can be emotionally evocative; carefully consider who to invite.
 - Trusted community members can assist.
 - Aim for diverse representation (gender, age, language, experience), but consider how it affects social dynamics and engagement.
 - Participants' time commitment, travel expenses, and potential income loss (compensation).
- **Space:** Needs vary (e.g., digital storytelling requires space for creating artwork (paint, clay), photography needs outdoor access). Ensure privacy, comfort, and appropriate physical accessibility.
- **Language:** Crucial to use participants' primary language for information and consent. Plan for translators and sufficient time.



Six ethical challenges in DST

CHALLENGE

SITUATION

Fuzzy boundaries

DST falls at the nexus of research & advocacy

Recruitment & consent

Recruiting diverse participants; indirect consent for others featured in stories

Power of shaping

Storyteller autonomy; tensions between emphasising products vs process

Representation & harm

Stories may cause discomfort or expose participants to harm

Confidentiality

May not always be possible or appropriate

Release of materials

Separate from workshop participation; requires specific permission

Source: Adapted from Gubrium et al. (2014)





Indirect consent

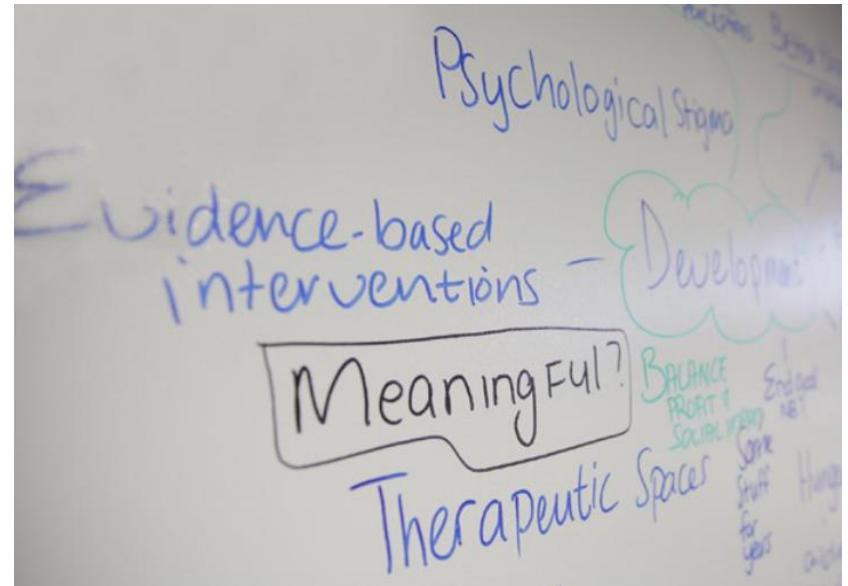


- Stories often feature people other than the author
- **Training:** Participants must be trained on the ethics of photography (avoiding taking photos of people's faces, and of children)
- **Considerations for ethical DST practice:**
 - Obtain written consent from featured third parties
 - Blur faces (no consent) and sensitive information (e.g., ID numbers on certificates)



Why use PVMs in research?

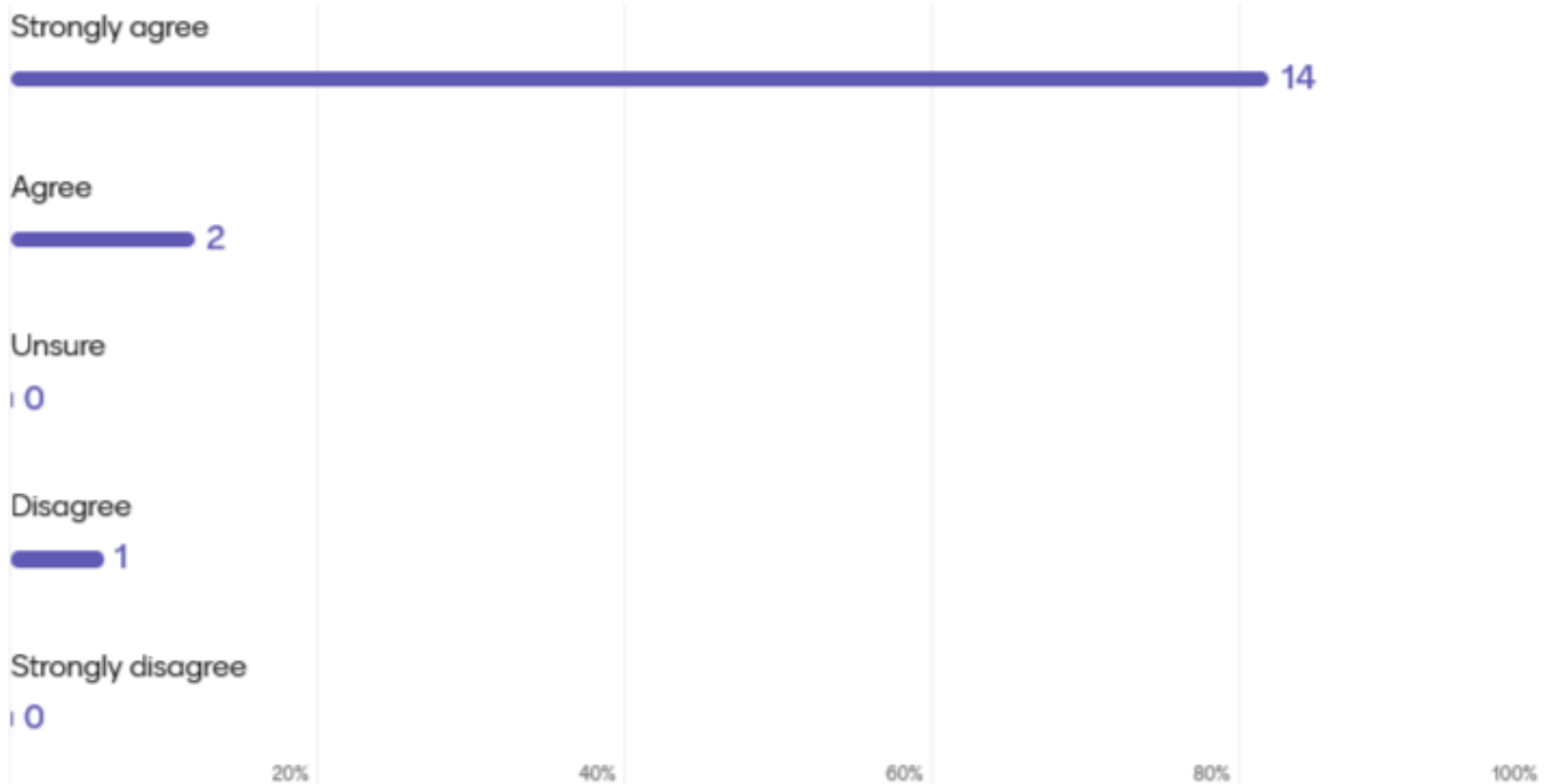
- PAR – **advocacy!**
- Arts-based: Creative forms of expression enable participants to **reach wider audiences**, develop **new insights** and ways of learning and sharing knowledge.
- Fosters **interaction** and **balances power dynamics**, enabling a more **equitable exchange** of knowledge.
- Helps to **transcend language and literacy barriers**, making research accessible to diverse communities.
- **Reach hard-to-reach communities**, e.g., informal businesses, build relationships
- Enables the **inclusion** of voices often excluded from traditional research or public discourse





Stories are a form of data

17 / 17





The process is as important as the product!

- **Gather meaningful data**
- Facilitates **dialogue, trust, and learning on all sides**
- Intense engagement over several days, weeks, months – process helps with **explaining and understanding complex topics**
- **Co-production, co-ownership** of research outputs
- Approach encourages researchers to reflect (and reconsider) their own assumptions about the concepts they use or topics they wish to address – **change and improve how we do research**
- Contributes to building an understanding that is **‘grounded in context’**

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BREAKAWAY GROUPS

- **Option 1: Photovoice – telling a story through photos and visuals**
- **Option 2: Digital storytelling – co-creating a story arc, the basis of a digital story**

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Designing the guiding prompt

Leave the prompt/guiding question sufficiently open so that participant perspectives can be seen through a wide lens. The prompt should be open, straightforward and easily translatable into the locally spoken language **avoid steering participants in a specific direction.**

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Research question (What the study seeks to investigate): What experiences do students identify as pivotal in shaping their educational and career aspirations?

Guiding prompt/question (participant-facing prompt that elicits reflections, images and stories):

- Photo-story prompt: What shaped your decision to pursue tertiary education? Take or share photos/images that show the places, people, objects, or moments that influenced your choice.
- Digital story prompt: Tell us a TRUE story about an experience that shaped your decision to pursue tertiary education.



Designing the guiding prompt

A prompt is not neutral. It gives the story direction

The method is shaped before any presses record...

1. Research question

2. Prompt wording

3. Facilitation space

4. Story development

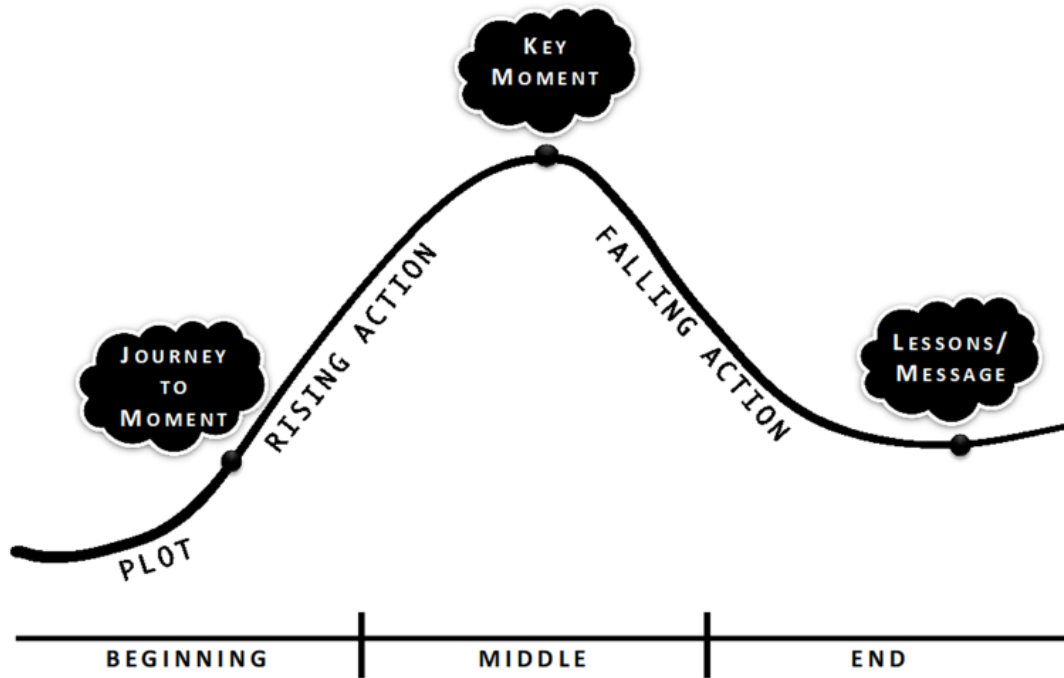
5. Editing and Interpretation

6. Sharing and dissemination



Your Story Anchor

Story Arc



Exercise:

- Where are you?
- What is happening?
- Who is present?
- Why has this stayed with you?
- What led up to it?
- What happened because of it?



Digital storytelling story circle prompts

- *What is the KEY MOMENT in the story?
- *Does the arc of the story work well?
- *Does the beginning start where it needs to?
- *Does the middle create enough and vivid details?
- *Does the end feel like an ending?



PHOTO **VOICE**
Carnarvon Photographers







Photo 1: What comes to mind when you see this photo?

avoiding the front seat
accident taxi school taxis
public transport industry residential area
happy people bullies fear reckless driving
stress music mobility
travel transport logistics
journey kasi noise
local economy
transportation



Photo 2: What comes to mind when you see this photo?

beginning
exploration
happy place cold
nature
beauty
sea breeze calmness earth
breath of fresh air happy times
calm
peace
clean beach
sirene
limitless
fresh air



Photo 3: What comes to mind when you see this photo?

abandoned desolation quite
isolation childhood happy days
laughing playing sad
lonely alone fun happiness
nursery school contemplative family time
play magic momlife
sadness





Key messages

- What you see may not be what I see (what do you want to highlight?)
- Symbolic images can say more than pictures of people
- Conveys emotions
- Photographs do not have to be perfect to be powerful (meaning and emotion)



Ethical guidelines for taking photographs

Training in basic photography – include ethical guidelines

What **do** I take pictures of? (everyday life, what you want to share about yourself and where you live, change in your community, what you want to contribute to the topic...)

What should I **not** take pictures of? (people's faces - privacy, children, consent -, illegal activities unless you feel very strongly about it and have considered the risks of revealing activities, personal)



Pictures of people:

Be patient – back facing camera, head down

Clearly identifiable – ask permission, get written consent (consent form 4)



Story circle

- *Prompt: What shaped your decision to pursue tertiary education? Take or share photos/images that show the places, people, objects, or moments that influenced your choice.*
- **Story circle – facilitates discussion, co-learning and co-creation.**
- Each person in the circle describes their story
- Listening friend, person next to them on the right, summarises the story, **address a set of questions** (write the questions on a flip chart and paste on the wall):
 - Is there variety in the collection of photos (not all about the same idea/thing/experience)?
 - What emotions are evoked?
 - How does it answer the research question?
 - Can I relate / is it applicable to me?

The through this process of one or two story circles, the photo-stories are co-produced and refined.

SHOWED (drafting photo captions)

Name of Photographer/Pseudonym _____

Title of Picture _____

Date _____

S	“What is Seen here?” (Describe what the eye sees)
H	“What is really Happening?” (The unseen “story” behind the image)
O	“How does this relate to Our lives?” (Or MY life personally)
W	“Why are things this way?”
E	“How could this image Educate people?”
D	“What can I Do about it?” (What WILL I or WE do about it?)

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Thank you

Any questions?

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Discussion

- How might you apply/have you applied these methods in your own context?
- What makes these methods powerful?
- How can we navigate the risks and ethical considerations?
- What do we need to consider when using AI to create photo or digital story?
- How do we analyse and writing-up visual stories as data



Some useful resources

- The session draws on examples from these research studies:
 - university-community engagement (photo-voice)
<https://hsrc.ac.za/about-cestii/policy-related-indicator-development/>
 - innovation in the informal sector (digital storytelling)
<https://informalbizinnovationhub.hsrc.ac.za/>
 - community safety (digital storytelling)
[WhatWeLiveWithEveryDayIsNotRightFINALREPORT.pdf](https://www.hsrc.ac.za/files/WhatWeLiveWithEveryDayIsNotRightFINALREPORT.pdf)
- Gillian F. Black & Mary Chambers. (2019). The practice and ethics of participatory visual methods for community engagement in public health and health science. The Global Health Network.
- Gillian F. Black, Alun Davies, Dalia Iskander & Mary Chambers. (2018). Reflections on the ethics of participatory visual methods to engage communities in global health research, Global Bioethics, 29:1, 22-38, DOI: 10.1080/11287462.2017.1415722.
- **Free course:** *To gain access, a user will need to register with The Global Health Network (requires entering an e-mail address and creating a password).*
<https://globalhealthtrainingcentre.tghn.org/introduction-and-practical-guide-cei-health-research/>



Thank you!

