LOOKING THROUGH, LOOKING AT and LOOKING BEHIND: USING PHOTOS in RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

Zelma Bone
Charles Sturt University, Orange, Australia
zbone@csu.edu.au

Abstract: Visual methods, for example, photographs are used in many disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology, but they are not widely used in business research. Four years ago, photographs were taken to capture the writing group experiences of nine business academics at an Australian university. Partly assisted by this photographic archive, the researcher revisited and interviewed the writing group participants. The aim of this study was multi-faceted: to capture the experiences of being part of the writing group and the writing retreat; to evaluate the value of the photograph in assisting recall of these experiences; to introduce business colleagues to the use and potential of photos in the research interview; and ultimately, to consider and encourage wider use of photos in their business research.

This study uses photo elicitation interviews (PEI) using a phenomenological and narrative perspective with business academics to evoke recall of the writing retreat. The PEIs investigated the images to construct the internal (content of the image) narrative and the external (social context and social relationships) narrative. ‘Looking through’ refers to the image content as if looking through a window at a set of objects (Parker, 2009). What can we see? ‘Looking at’ is an examination of the way the content of the image is presented, for example, the use of light, arrangement of items. Finally, we gain understanding the context by ‘looking behind’; looking more deeply at the photographs and stories they are eliciting from the participants (Parker 2009). When introducing photographs part-way through the interview process the immediate ‘rush of emotion’ was tangible. Responses became more graphic and more detailed. The photographs, taken by one of the participants, had the power to elicit information that would not have been gained in a traditional verbal interview.

The potential for photographs to be used in business-related research seems endless, as photographs can capture the historical and contemporary world of business. The photograph is applicable to business research because accounting, management and photographs share common features of portraying people, events and processes, and communication between present and past. As a result of this project, the business academics are more informed about the use and value of PEIs as they have had first-hand experience. Many have expressed an interest in considering using photographs in future projects. They have seen that this methodology would be useful to extract meaningful information from people and to minimise the awkwardness that sometime happens when interviewing.

Revisiting the writing group and the associated writing retreat through the use of PEI highlighted the importance of collegiality and collaboration in the potentially isolating academic environment. Activities like this emphasise the key objectives of furthering the research agenda within the university, sharing ideas with colleagues, benefits of learning about different research methods, and collaborating on research projects. This study also emphasised the importance of considering academics’ interpretations of their experiences when generating policies about developing quality teaching and learning in business disciplines.

Key words: Photo-elicitation; business; visual methodologies research interviews
Introduction

The use of visual stimuli in the form of photographs, drawings, art and video recordings have been increasingly used for research in the fields of ethnography, anthropology, sociology and psychology (Harrison 2002; Frith & Harcourt 2007). However, visual methods such as photographs have not been widely used in the business disciplines (Parker 1999; Parker 2009; Petersen & Oestergaard 2003; Warren 2005). Hurworth (2003) found that introducing photographs into research interviews has shown to have many advantages, including it can be used at any stage of the research; produces unpredictable information; promotes longer, more detailed interviews in comparison with verbal interviews; and provides a component of multi-methods triangulation to improve rigour. The potential for photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) to be applied to the business research field, where appropriate, would appear to be endless.

This paper reports on the use of photographs to capture the writing group experiences of business academics in an Australian university. The researcher is re-visiting the writing group experience four years after the writing retreat took place. The aim of this research was multi-focused: to capture the experiences of being part of the writing group and the writing retreat; to evaluate the value of the photograph in assisting recall of these experiences; to introduce business colleagues to the use and to recognise the potential of photos in the research interview; and ultimately, to consider and encourage wider use of photos in their business research.

Background

In 2008 three academics, two from the Faculty of Business and one from the Faculty of Education, were successful in gaining a Scholarship in Teaching (SiT) grant to initiate a SiT writing group for academic staff within the Faculty of Business. Nine academics volunteered to be part of the writing group and the group was facilitated by the three academics. The academic from the Faculty of Education acted as a ‘broker’ (Wenger 1998) in the writing group community of practice to introduce members to the concept of scholarship in teaching. The writing group met on a fortnightly basis during the year and culminated in a three-day writing retreat which formed the context for the PEIs.

Our focus for the SiT project was on scholarly writing, a core capability for academics that has traditionally been seen as a solo, often lonely, endeavour. We challenged this representation by demonstrating how a writing group can create for early career academics a cooperative space for situated learning within an academic workplace. Building on the work of Lee (1997) we revisited questions such as: How is the knowledge in a field produced? What models of research are available for generating new knowledge? What are productive ways of bringing together theory, practice and research in developing academic writing and publication?

There were both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ outcomes related to the writing group project. The hard outcomes were measurable, observable and brought recognition to the university. These outcomes included the articles accepted for publication in journals, the conference presentations and peer-reviewed conference papers which were products of the writing group process. The softer outcomes while immeasurable were perhaps the most valuable in terms of the initial purpose of the writing group. All of the members of the group have increased in their confidence as writers, and as reviewers of their colleagues’ work. They feel comfortable sharing their ideas and work-in-progress with the writing group community of practice, and can confidently reflect on and initiate ideas around scholarship of teaching. One participant took numerous photographs of the event.

As it was a very successful exercise we wanted to ‘tell the story’ of the writing group as a means to generate more interest in scholarship in teaching. One way of capturing the experiences of the writing group and writing retreat was by revisiting the exercise through this study and by using the photographs as a stimulus to evoke the reflections and the memories.
3  Photo elicitation interview (PEI)

Photo elicitation involves ‘the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview’ (Harper 2002:13). The earliest forms of photo elicitation can be traced to the work of photographer and researcher John Collier (1957) at Cornell University. Collier and his research team used PEI to examine mental health in changing communities in Canada. Harper (2002) reported that Collier and the research team did PEI as well as non-photographic interviews with the same families to see how each method worked. The PEI was found to elicit longer and more comprehensive interviews with richer data being collected (Collier 1957:858).

The introduction of the photograph into the interview can make the interview more relaxed. Schwartz (1989:151-152) highlighted that interviewees respond to photographs:

... without hesitation. By providing informants with a task similar to viewing a family album, the strangeness of the interview situation is averted.

Hurworth (2003) also identified that PEIs assisted with building trust and rapport by bridging psychological and physical boundaries as well as giving the researcher the opportunity to collect a combination of visual and verbal language.

Parker (2009:11-12) focussed on opportunities for the visual methodologies in business research, particularly in the accounting and management areas. Firstly, photographs of people, places and objects can illustrate human activity in the business world and can reveal more of the many experiences and behaviours that may not be captured purely through textual accounts (Petersen & Oestergaard 2003; Warren 2005). Secondly, unlimited opportunities in exploring the symbolism in historical commercial and business architecture; and studies of the context in which ‘scientific management and work study was photographically applied to factory and work functions for analysing their process and improving their efficiency’ (Parker 2009:12). And thirdly, searching archives for photographs and using contemporary photographs for research purposes. These potentially offer opportunities for deconstruction and critique of various situations, challenging past beliefs and interpretations of events.

4  Methodology

This was a qualitative study using photos as a visual research method. This method is subjective as the photographs elicit individual and social constructions and how to visualise the past and present it in new and different ways (Parker 2009). PEIs give the ‘potential for contextualising, interpretative and critical discovery using a phenomenological and narrative perspective’ (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel 2006:2). Phenomenology and narrative inquiry are both forms of qualitative research.

Phenomenology is the study of ‘phenomena: appearance of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience’ (Smith 2011:1). Lester (1999) identified that phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives. The photograph has the ability to reflect and evoke feelings, signification, and multiple voices that offer understandings and critiques that go beyond the confines of representation through language (Parker 1999: 10). In this way the photo can augment the textual analysis.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) narrative inquiry is an understanding of narrative as both phenomena under study and method of study. Narrative inquiry uses many forms of text materials but also can include photographs as units of analysis. It is an approach to understanding and researching the way people create meaning of their lives as narratives. The collection of photos used in this research project was chosen to convey a strong implied narrative: the content of the photographs providing an internal narrative and the context of the photographs providing the external narrative (Parker 2009; Banks (in Epstein et al. 2006)). Banks (in Epstein et al. 2006:5) also advised researchers to distinguish between the content of a photograph and its context. Photographs can be
interpreted internally (content: what message has been sent) and externally (context: what we see in the photo). Interpretation of the photographs was extended to ‘looking through’ (content), ‘looking at’ (the content) and ‘looking behind’ (the context) (Parker 2009) to assist in understanding the main themes. The photographs used in this study are attached in Appendix 1.

In each interview, the writing retreat participants were asked about their recollections of the writing retreat at Millamolong and for their motivations for being part of such an exercise. The aim of the retreat was to get far away from the work environment, to Millamolong homestead, (built environment); to a situation with nice surrounds (natural environment); and with a group of people that had common ground (social environment). The photographs were categorised into those representing the built, natural or social environments.

The photographs were introduced into the interview part way through. Key questions used in the interviews to prompt responses and gain recollections were:

- Why do they exist? Who created them? What is the biography? What do they represent?
- The photographer – under what circumstances were the images created? By whom and for what audience? Who had control of the image content?
- The built environment (Appendix 1: Photos 1-4). What did you like/dislike about the place? When you were there how did you feel? Any sounds? Smells? What do you think your colleagues liked about this place? What would you change?
- The natural environment (Appendix 1: Photos 5-8). What was it like being close to nature, on a farm, far away from work? What are the things you did here – in the natural environment? What did you like/dislike? What would you change?
- The social environment (Appendix 1: Photos 9-13). What do you think of these photos? What were the good and not so good things about having time together in this type of activity? What were you doing when others were in discussions?

5 The photographer and the photographs

The photographs represented the experience of the writing retreat through the ‘lens’ of one of the participants and thus were significant to the interviewees (Keller et al. 2008). The photographer was a keen amateur photographer with a strong sense of the aesthetic. The interview participants acknowledged that he has a great deal of empathy and respect for people. This comes through in the content and context of the photos. He was trying to ‘capture the essence of the people who were there and he took the photographs because he wanted to give the participants a record of the time together’ (Participant response).

The original photographs were in colour. However, these were photocopied in black and white for the interviews as they tended to be ‘more evocative than colour photography. It stimulated a faster onrush of memories because ‘less has been given, more has been left out ...’ (Berger 1992:192-193). The photographs were a visual reminder of the experience of the writing retreat and aided the participants in the telling their story of this event. The photographs captured many different emotions, situations, locations, and relationships that had been ‘snapped’ in the image. For example, one of the most ‘popular’ photographs was the meal time around the kitchen table (Figure 1).

The photos were taken at the writing retreat and then stored with the organiser. Four years later the photographs were reviewed and used for this project’s interview to evoke oral narratives. Dominant themes were identified from the interview narratives. Parker (2009:10) suggested one way of interpreting photographs to capture the layering of image viewing and reading was by looking through, looking at and looking behind.
6 Looking through and looking at: The content or internal narrative

‘Looking through’ refers to identifying the image content, i.e. the internal narrative, as if looking through a window at a set of objects (Parker 2009). What can we see through the window? What are people wearing? What/how are they eating/discussing/working? Facial expressions? Gestures?

‘Looking at’ is an examination of the way the content of the image is presented, for example, the use of light, arrangement of elements (Parker, 2009). What does the image imply? What is represented? What is absent? Why?

The dining room table in the kitchen was a favourite ‘place’ to gather for informal conversations. Interactional mannerisms indicated a group that knows each other well, are comfortable with each other and are pleased to be spending time together. The casual attire of the participants reflected the relaxed atmosphere of the place. These photos represent the social environment (Figures 1&2; Appendix 1: photos 10-13).

The built environment is represented in Figure 3 and Appendix 1 (photos 1-4). Millamolong homestead with its native garden setting was the location for the writing retreat (Figure 2). It was a large nine bedroom homestead ninety minutes drive from campus. It provided space apart but space
to be together; it was off campus with no ‘work’ distractions; with comfortable surrounds; and pleasing aesthetics.

Figure 3: Millamolong homestead. ‘Stunning. It was spring. The rural surrounds were idyllic’. ‘Nothing to dislike about the place’. ‘Loved the architecture of the house. Bits added on. It was an organic house’. (Participants’ comments).

The bucolic location was peaceful and quiet with no distractions from everyday work pressures. The natural environment (Appendix 1: Photos 5-8) gave many the opportunity to walk the undulating hills of the farm. A vineyard (Figure 4) was part of the property. It was arranged for the vineyard manager to give a wine tasting on the veranda one evening. The group learned more about the history of Millamolong and grew more attached to the ‘place’.

Figure 4: (Appendix 1: Photo 8) Horse and vineyard and (Photo 5) Busy bees and flower – ‘All of the vineyard is above 600 metres in altitude. Wine tasting at 6.30pm on the front veranda. We learned about the history of Millamolong. We grew more attached to our place – we were putting the treat into retreat.’ ‘Busy as a bee! Again we reflected what was happening in nature. Busy bee in the garden; busy as a bee in the homestead. Heads down and writing. Making the best use of our time.’ (Participants’ comments)

The social environment (Figure 5 and Appendix 1: Photos 9-13) depicted the numerous discussions, eating times, relaxing in the formal lounge and walking in the grounds. Figure 5 shows the warmth of
the light streaming in the window of the formal lounge room. It was a situation conducive to collegial discussions and relaxation.

Figure 5: (Appendix 1: Photo 12) Discussion point with sun streaming through the window – ‘The formal lounge gave us a nice, comfortable space to work and to discuss things. The sun coming in the window is warming, as was the discussion. We have separate corners to work in this room but we also have room to congregate near the window.’ (Participant comment)

7 Looking behind: the context or external narrative

‘Looking behind’ signified the focus on image context as the construction of an external narrative (social context and social relationships) (Parker 2009). This involved looking more deeply at the photographs and the stories that they elicited from the participants. The external narrative woven from the participants’ stories gave a rich perspective on the people present, their feelings about the location and the experience of the event (Beilin 2005). Understanding this context was vital to the interpretation. A strong sense of collegiality and collaboration was portrayed. The colleagues ‘welcomed the peace’ and being able to get away from ‘crowded days’ (Figure 6).

A common reaction from the participants when shown the photographs was delight as the memories of this time were brought to the fore. The photographs ‘spurred meaning that otherwise might have remained dormant in a face-to-face interview’ (Clark-Ibanez 2004:1513). The participants’ responses lengthened and became more detailed as they explored the photographs. The colleagues spoke warmly of their shared focus on teaching and learning research and acknowledged their differing approaches as the nine academics came from varying business disciplines - accounting, finance, management, and marketing. These multiple voices were contributing to the reflections. Accountants in the group did things ‘differently’ to colleagues from the other disciplines. They preferred to get straight to work and have discussion later on. Others liked to discuss first and then get to work on their individual projects or collaborations.

The photographs were also re-examined with a view to interpreting the detail and nuances of the organisational life, the writing retreat portrayed and the changes that have occurred since the photographs have been taken. Davis (1973:18) described the sense of nostalgia that can be evoked when using PEI: ‘a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward the present of impending circumstance’. The study elicited strong feelings of nostalgia from all participants:

‘Reminds me of a nice time. Sad that we will not have this again’. ‘Belonged to an era that has past’. ‘Something like this would not get funded now’. (Participants’ comments)
The writing retreat, four years in the past, was associated with positive affects, while the present was viewed in a relatively negative way. The current climate in higher education was seen as a time of increased compliance with greater accountability, greater demands on academic's time and more emphasis on discipline-related research outcomes in performance management. The participants acknowledged that research outcomes were important but not nearly as important as the social components of the workplace. They emphasised the significance of achieving outcomes and improving writing skills as well as output. The writing retreat gave them the time and space to put many of the writing skills they had learned over the year into practice. The motivations for being part of the writing group and retreat were to improve writing skills to increase publication and to spend time with colleagues in a pleasant environment away from workplace pressures.

Which group of photographs did the participants like best? All of the participants agreed that it was the ‘social environment’ group of photos that were their favourites (Figure 7; Appendix 1 Photos 9-13). Why? In their words:
8 Issues and implications

Revisiting the writing retreat through the use of the PEI highlighted the importance of collegiality and collaboration in an academic environment which often can be isolating. Activities such as the writing group and writing retreat emphasised the key objectives of furthering the research agenda within the university, sharing ideas with colleagues, benefits of learning about different research methods, and collaborating on research projects. The benefits of having the experience recorded in photographs which the group share are ongoing. The PEI gave the participants a chance to reflect on their writing group experiences and continue the conversations around learning and teaching and leading to further collaborative projects. Harper (2002:23) identified the significance of photographs:

My enthusiasm for photo elicitation also comes from the collaboration it inspires. When two or more people discuss the meaning of photography they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research.

From a research perspective, the photographs generated data on the writing retreat that the interviewee could see but was invisible to the researcher (Schwartz 1989). The photographs were a powerful tool to elicit richer information about the experience. The greater detail in responses was due largely to the introduction of the photographs into the interview. Berger (1992:192) found that ‘the thrill found in a photograph comes from the onrush of memory’. In this study, the participants’ responses gave different perspectives on the experience with differing emphases on the significance of events.

However, the reflections identified an activity like this is almost a thing of the past (particularly in the learning and teaching areas). Writing workshops and retreats are now more strictly focussed on specific discipline-related research, achieving publications in the highest ranked journals and gaining the university kudos in the research arena.

9 Conclusion

The use of the photograph in the research interview with the business colleagues was very successful in evoking powerful recall of the writing group experience and, in particular, the writing retreat at the end of the year. When the photographs were introduced part way through the interview the immediate ‘rush of emotion’ was tangible. Responses became more graphic and more detailed. A strong sense of nostalgia, relating to good times in the past was evident. The photographs had the power to elicit this information that may not have had been gained in a traditional verbal interview. As a result of this project, the business academics are more informed about the use and the value of the PEI as they have had first-hand experience. Many have expressed an interest in considering using photographs in future projects. They have seen that this methodology would be useful to extract meaningful information from people and to minimise the awkwardness that sometime happens when interviewing.

Although relatively under-utilised in business research, the potential that photographs could bring to projects are almost endless. However, before incorporating PEI researchers must be able to justify that PEI is the most appropriate method to generate data. The photograph is very applicable to business research because accounting, management and photographs share common features of portraying people, events and processes, and communication between present and past (Parker 2009). Many advantages have been highlighted in the paper that would support the use of photographs, or other visual methods, becoming an integral part of both research methodology and its outputs.
10 References


**Appendix 1: The photographs of the writing retreat at Millamolong Homestead**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Built Environment – buildings, physical structures</th>
<th>Natural Environment – natural surroundings, animals, birds, trees</th>
<th>Social Environment - people, communal spaces, discussion points, meal times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="The homestead" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Busy bees and flower" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Communal kitchen" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4.jpg" alt="Sculpture in the garden" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.jpg" alt="Bird in trees" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.jpg" alt="Night time in the lounge" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image7.jpg" alt="Kitchen with Aga" /></td>
<td><img src="image8.jpg" alt="Mare and foal" /></td>
<td><img src="image9.jpg" alt="Around the kitchen table" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The formal lounge</td>
<td>8. Horse and vineyard</td>
<td>12. Discussion point with sun streaming in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image10.jpg" alt="The formal lounge" /></td>
<td><img src="image11.jpg" alt="Horse and vineyard" /></td>
<td><img src="image12.jpg" alt="Discussion point" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Busy bees and flower</td>
<td></td>
<td>13. The front veranda</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image13.jpg" alt="Busy bees and flower" /></td>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image14.jpg" alt="The front veranda" /></td>
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