

# Empowering images:

## *Using PhotoVoice with tenants with special needs*

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**Abstract**  
*The author has used photography to engage tenants in examining services and their lives, communities, hopes and dreams. PhotoVoice is a way of promoting active participation and dialogue, and is particularly attractive to people who have difficulty with verbal or written communication. PhotoVoice enables others to see the world as perceived and experienced by service users and is an effective way of empowering tenants and involving them in research and change strategies.*

**Introduction**  
I first became aware of the power of pictures when I helped to set up a community darkroom on what might now disparagingly be described as a 'sink estate'. The residents there, however, were more concerned to use cameras to celebrate their achievements and to illustrate the failure of agencies to help them to improve their environment.

**Using cameras to encourage dialogue**  
Twenty years later, in evaluating an innovative mixed-ability

housing project for further education students (Woolrych, 2001), I reflected on problems of tenant satisfaction interviews with people with learning difficulties, and the parent of one student got Kodak to donate some disposable cameras. Some students volunteered to take



Housing Association tenants selecting photos – tape recorder is on the table

pictures of their lives and to record on tape what people said about their photos. People signed to say that their photographs could be used by the researcher, the housing association and the college. Having agreed a theme, we spent a lot of time looking at the photos and selecting those that illustrated what people liked and did not like about services and where and how they lived. We talked to one person who had moved on, and the tenant doing the interview was much more direct than I was trained to be as a researcher – he asked: 'Were there any staff you really hated?'.  
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## Origins of PhotoVoice

Although the term 'PhotoVoice' was copyrighted in the USA by Caroline Wang, the UK PhotoVoice was also founded in 1998 and has its own website and set of international projects and partnerships. Both sites offer a wealth of information, and I have found practitioners and researchers on both sides of the Atlantic to be generous in sharing their knowledge and experience. The US site tends to be more academic in its content and defines PhotoVoice as

*a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. It entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to act as recorders, and potential catalysts for social action and change, in their own communities. It uses the immediacy of the visual image and accompanying stories to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise to create healthful public policy.*

## Using PhotoVoice

### Self-advocacy and image-based virtual communication

I have used PhotoVoice in regional work with self-advocacy groups (Eastern Region Photo Project), looking together at the implementation of the White Paper *Valuing People*. With DoH funding, groups used disposable cameras to illustrate how services make life in the community good. The website

contains 20 folders of photographs and comments and provides an approach which could easily be replicated across the country if funding were available. Web-based communities and links using photographs are surprisingly undeveloped.

### Use with elderly tenants

In work with elderly tenants in sheltered accommodation, their images in the report I was commissioned to write became the most powerful ingredient for

empowered both tenants and managers to obtain change in how the association responded to repairs and improvements.

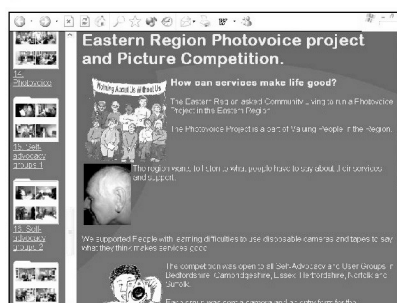
### Getting Together conferences

Coming together to view photographs using a digital projector enables people who have not met before to have a dialogue. Nationally, PhotoVoice has enabled Camphill residents to come together in a series of regional and national conferences ([www.photovoice.org](http://www.photovoice.org)).



Author assisting Camphill conference delegates in taking digital photos

change. Pictures of the same disabling barriers and environmental and repair problems in different schemes



Web based communities using photographs are surprisingly undeveloped

### Consultation about services

PhotoVoice has enabled residents to have added voice in consultations about changing from registered residential care. More recently it is being pioneered to promote participation in self-assessment reviews under Supporting People. Working with Camphill, I have found that simple digital cameras have a number of advantages, principally in the instant results that they provide.



Natalie taking a photograph of a fellow tenant moving into his new flat

## Operational considerations

### Digital cameras

Being able to see the photos as they are taken rapidly builds trust, confidence and involvement. People want to view their images and to participate, and facilitating those who find it difficult to hold or operate a camera means that no-one is excluded from taking part. Encouraging people to take lots of pictures is important – viewing them together on a TV is easy and those that don't work can be easily deleted.

Coming together again later to look at the images helps to add meaning and to identify photographs with particular resonance. It is important to encourage participants to be selective. Indeed, every time

pictures are viewed, meaning is added and a process of selection takes place. It is the role of the facilitator to sustain this process and to assist participants in recording key comments and information. In order to do this there are important ethical issues to resolve about consent, use of images and confidentiality.

### Computer training

Using a computer to edit and select photos can assist storytelling. Grouping three or four photos on an A4 page is the easiest way to work, and carries with it the discipline of deciding which four photos should be grouped together – what happens if images are changed or their order is changed? I am a reluctant convert to new technology. Four years ago we used A3 sheets on which to arrange prints and work out captions. A4 can be enlarged at



Newby and five others at Delrow Camphill recently learned to print and edit their photos

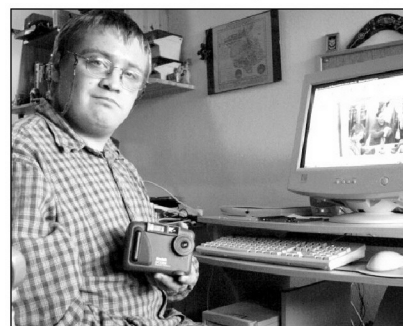
a copy shop to A3 size and laminated if required for exhibition purposes. For those who are technically challenged, scissors and glue for a traditional cut and paste is still a good option.

The independence and impartiality of the facilitator are

vital if people are to be frank about saying what they feel and think. Often they will agree to their words being used, so long as we do not say who said what, but when we review the results together confidentiality and non-attributability are generally a problem only when a person is saying something controversial. Indeed most people want to see their pictures shown widely, and the recognition it brings is a powerful form of community inclusion. I learned a lot from the disappointment of one tenant I interviewed for my dissertation when I explained that the University guidelines prevented me from using his name or photo.

### 'Catching it with honour...'

Another important dimension is respect in how people are portrayed. One homeless person commented: 'It's catching it with honour' (QHA, 2003). It was important to him and his friends that they were taking the pictures and not someone paid to produce images to conform to popular stereotypes and prejudices. Jim Hubbard, a pioneer in this field, found the same in his seminal work *Shooting Back* (1991). However,



Alex with his camera and computer on which he compiles a newsletter for tenants in Milton Keynes Camphill

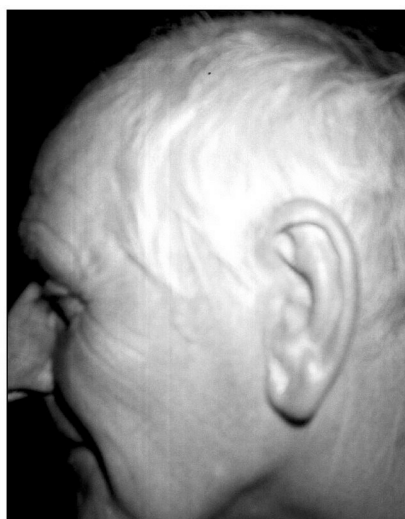
QHA recently had to withdraw a poster when the person portrayed became concerned that relatives might find out where he was, even though initially he had been very happy with the photograph and his friend's words about him (QHA, 2003).

### Services which listen

For people with learning difficulties, more abstract concepts like respect can be understood more readily through photographs. North Herts People First illustrated what was important for services to remember by taking a photo of their member with the biggest ear (Woolrych, 2003).

### Participation in the Supporting People review process

I have recently used PhotoVoice successfully as a way of involving tenants in the self-assessment process for review of Supporting People. This involved four stages: a meeting to plan how we would work together, for



Big Ear... symbolising services which listen....

which volunteer photographers self-selected, interviews with tenants singly or in pairs, a meeting to look at the initial results of the first day's photoshoot, and analysis, using written and taped records, of things the meeting had identified that had not been photographed. Finally, selected photos and quotations were combined in a PowerPoint presentation which was shown to tenants and staff together.



Tenant participation in Supporting People service review



Tenants took photographs illustrating where they live and their likes and dislikes

One tenant commented

*'We've given you our opinions and you've reflected them back to us... we gave them individually and frankly... you've made it clearer... big letters...'*

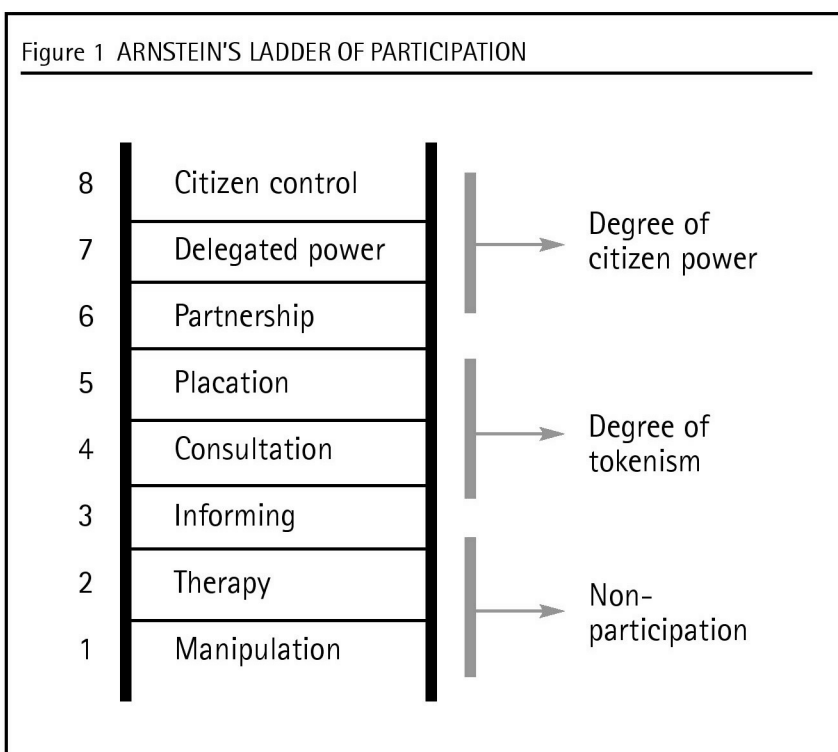
### Person-centred planning and individual advocacy

One person I had never met managed, with the help of his parents and staff, to make a photographic record of things he did like and did not like about what he was being offered. As a result, when he met me for the first time he was clearly able to indicate his choice and preferences, and as an independent professional I was able to validate his responses and to document the process using PhotoVoice. As a result, he was able to persuade social services to withdraw their objections to the place where he wanted to live.

### Levels of participation

Levels of participation can be described in terms of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969) - Figure 1, opposite.

On the lower rungs, PhotoVoice may be seen as part of a tool kit for service evaluation and consultation. The level or rung will depend both on what is being looked at together and on the depth of engagement of the co-researcher or facilitator. It is the human time investment in this process which is expensive. As an independent practitioner, I find it hard to persuade those funding my time to look at this as a long-term process and investment. PhotoVoice has particular significance for self-determination and direct payments, not least because it enables people to learn from each other and to create positive 'can do' stories in pictures. The Ladder of Participation is also



useful in helping organisations to recognise what level of participation is currently taking place. On the top three rungs PhotoVoice can be considered as a form of participatory action research (PAR), recently summarised by Peter Reason (2003) as

*... how we can help articulate voices that have been silenced. How do we draw people together in conversation when they were not before? How can we create space for people to articulate their world in the face of power structures which silence them?*

## Conclusions

I have given examples of how PhotoVoice has been used in my work as a researcher, development consultant and

advocacy worker. Its main feature is the extent to which it involves as equal partners those who take and comment on the photographs. I do not take on work unless my co-researchers are able to participate in agreeing on the themes and scope of what we do together. It is a reflective process, where the observations and impressions of the facilitator can be held up like a mirror to reflect back to other participants and those who commissioned the research. The photographs are an integral part of such a process. It is a process which can challenge assumptions and power structures. It is a way of finding out things together and presenting them to much wider groups of people. It is fun, a creative way of finding out things together that enables people to highlight concerns,

strengths and issues, which promotes awareness and dialogue about issues presented in the photographs and influences policy makers. For housing and support services it represents a cost-effective, highly participative strategy that can assist them in ensuring that they are meeting their tenants' needs and aspirations.

## Contact

I am keen to hear from others doing similar image-based work: tel 01992 552784, email: [rwoolrych@ntlworld.com](mailto:rwoolrych@ntlworld.com)

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