LEAVING MEANINGFUL TRAILS BEHIND

PHOTOVOICE, AN UNCOMMON BUT EFFECTIVE WAY OF APPROACHING STORYTELLING WITH INDIGENOUS CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Children and youth across the globe experience varying circumstances, opportunities, and challenges. The lived-experiences of youth and the socioeconomic factors that influences one's environment and upbringing can sometimes be best explained by youth themselves. For this reason, researchers, and professions highly dependent on public engagement have become increasingly aware of the importance of involving children and youth in these processes (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2015; Hawke & Relihan & Millar, et al. 2018). Additionally, there is a greater push to not merely include youth but to provide opportunities that in some way feel youth-led (Liebenberg & Sylliboy & Davis-Ward & Vincent, 2017). Youth can be engaged in research and community projects in a variety of ways. However, facilitating meaningful engagements is all more important. This case-in-point will explore how two research projects utilized photography or photovoice activities to better engage with Indigenous youth, entice storytelling in an uncommon way and inspire meaningful discussions across generations. Indigenous approaches to storytelling and the use of it within planning contexts will be analyzed in the beginning of this document and revisited at the end with final thoughts on photovoice activities and Indigenous youth participation. The findings from each research project will demonstrate how meaningful photovioce strategies can be for Indigenous communities.

"Without storytelling, you can't really do this kind of work"

— Tim Hogan

1.0
CONTEXT

From a western perspective, storytelling can be understood as the act of telling stories. While, from an Indigenous perspective, storytelling can be understood as a process of communicating narratives and passing down knowledges and sacred teachings. These stories can be shared in a variety of ways such as orally, singing, drumming, dancing, art, and photography. There are many ways to interpret and use Indigenous stories that may change the course of the purpose. This is why Indigenous storytelling is often referred to as a multi-purpose practice (Fernandez-Liamazares & Cabeza, 2018). For instance, storytelling could be used to entertain, pass-down teachings, share lessons, maintain a sense of community, and instil a nation's principles (Corntassle & T'lakwadzi 2009; Fernandez-Liamazares & Cabeza, 2018). Literature also suggests that Indigenous storytelling "provides both ancestral and contemporary connections to place" (Corntassle & T'lakwadzi 2009, p. 137). In other words, Indigenous stories can tie nations to homelands and create narratives expressing pre-contact occupancy.

Storytelling is often perceived to represent the past and the imaginary. However, Indigenous people's stories are much more complex and diverse than the past and the imaginary. Indigenous stories often involve information on Mother Earth, ancestors, and animals, incorporate the four elements and spiritual beings, and seek to engage the heart and mind to ensure that transmission occurs across generations (Fernandez-Liamazares & Cabeza, 2018). These stories hold significant and sacred information that are intended to be passed down from generation-to-generation. These stories are also meant to be reinterpreted by subsequent generations. Reinterpretations commonly result from listener influence and sociocultural scenarios that adapt the dynamic nature of a story (Fernandez-Liamazares & Cabeza, 2018). For this reason, Indigenous storytelling can also be considered as an interactive practice involving the storyteller, the listener, and the environment.

More recently, the Indigenous storytelling practice has emerged another form of sharing known as *truth-telling*. *Truth-telling* initiatives have historically been linked to the development of truth commissions (Fullard & Rousseau, 2009).

In the Canadian context, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was established in 2007 and tasked with facilitating nation-wide inquiries. The inquiries concentrated on those directly and indirectly affected by the Indian Residential School (IRS) system in Canada (Government of Canada, 2020). Survivors and their families were provided the opportunity to share their stories and experiences, which would be documented and recognized nationally for the first time. For Indigenous peoples, truth-telling is the act of sharing the stories and experiences of living through colonization, marginalization, and displacement. Truth-telling aims to discredit false and biased narratives that form negative and untrue stereotypes and histories of Indigenous peoples and the nation-to-nation relationship with Canada.

Storytelling and Planning

Storytelling is an important aspect to planning practice but often goes unrecognized in the profession. The work of James Throgmorton, John Forester and Leonie Sandercock have spoken much about the use of storytelling in planning and have argued that the practice is crucial and necessary to the planning process. One of the most significant findings in existing literature have found that stories involved in general planning processes are usually future-oriented. Meaning that the participant(s) telling the story will offer ideas for the future such as development in a neighbourhood and provide suggestions on how theses ideas can be achieved (Hulst, 2012). Hulst (2012) argues that most of the stories generated from engagement sessions centered around discussion and storytelling are stories and experiences that "run from conflict through crisis to resolution" (301). However, planning processes that involve Indigenous communities can present both future and past-tense narratives. For instance, land-use studies often generate stories from Elders, knowledge keepers and community members that share information on how the land was used generations before. These stories help planners map out areas of significance based on the historical use of the land.

"Photovoice is a visual research methodology that puts cameras into the participants' hands to help them to document, reflect upon, and communicate issues of concern, while stimulating social change."

- Budig, et al. p.1

The practice of telling stories in planning is beneficial to the planner because narratives can often express an individual's opinion and attitude toward the planning subject. Storytelling has also been proven to mitigate conflict when parties involved in a planning process are provided the opportunity to share their narratives (Sandercock 2003). Additionally, storytelling activities can contribute to a democratic and inclusive planning process when done thoroughly (Hulst, 2012).

Photovoice

Photovoice methods use photographic activities to engage participants in recording and reflecting (Bradford & Zagozewski & Bharadwaj, 2017). Recording is carried out by taking photos of surroundings or places that are relevant to the study. Reflecting occurs after the photos are taken and developed. In this process, reflecting can be approached in multiple ways such as sharing circles, one-on-one inquiries about each photo and journal writing. Photovoice is often used to demonstrate how individuals perceive their community or themselves. Given the creative nature of photovoice, the method is primarily employed in studies and engagement sessions involving children and youth (Bradford et al., 2017; Truchon, 2007). The following sections will explain how three research studies used the photovoice method to engage youth.

FIGURE 1 | Photovoice Exhibition (Truchon, 2007)

2.0
CASE #1

Description:

Photography as a Talking Stick is a research project that involved more than 60 children and youth from the Innu community Uashat mak Mani-Utenam in Quebec, Canada. The research project was conducted by anthropologist Karoline Truchon in 2007. Truchon initially set out to offer the Innu youth an opportunity to express themselves visually and orally through photography. The research project lasted two-years and focused on what children and youth liked and disliked about their lives and their community. Each participant received a 27-picture disposable camera to photograph their interpretation of the project description. Truchon (2007) set out to facilitate a self-expression activity with the Innu youth and to analyze the themes from the developed photographs. What came from this project amazed the researcher and empowered the entire community to continue the project in some way.

Timeline:

Between July 2002 and June 2004

Methods:

Step 1: Expression

The first step was organizing a group of Innu children and youth to participate in the photovoice project. Truchon (2007) recruited half of the 60 youth participants from community houses and group foster care homes, while the remaining either asked to participate or were referred by adults in the community. The children and youth who participated in this project were the ages of 6-16 years old. Every participant was given a 27-picture disposable camera and asked to photograph the things they liked and disliked about their lives and their community. After the youth finished using the disposable cameras, the photos were developed. The second part of step one was getting the Innu children and youth to talk about their photographs. Truchon (2007) found that the youth chose to explain themselves in following format: "I like this photo because.." or "I don't like this photo because…" (p. 268).

These conversations were led informally – usually one-on-one with the researcher and participant. Truchon (2007) for the most part just let the children share what they wanted to share. She even labelled the conversations as "sharings" in her final report (Truchon, 2007, p. 258).

Step 2: Mobilization

An exhibition titled *Eshi uapatamat eshi mishkutshipanit anite nitinniniunnat/Notre vision du changement dans notre mode de vie/Our vision of change* in our lifestyle was developed to showcase the Innu youth's photography and private sharings. Of the 60 participants, 31 of them decided to submit their work for the Our Vision of Change exhibition. Truchon (2007) engaged 75 community members and outsiders to assist with the exhibition. Each exhibition participant was allocated 1 three-foot by four-foot poster board to display their work and provide descriptions.

Step 3: Production

The photo exhibition was a tremendous hit in the community. As an effort to keep the fire burning and empower the youth through media, Truchon (2007) formed ties with local media outlets and community events to organize opportunities for dissemination of the children's work. The youth's photography and sharings were circulated through local newspapers and displayed at museums, schools, and festivals.

Findings:

•Out of the 277 photographs included in the exhibition, 259 of them (93 percent) were about positive things in their lives.

•Some of the positive aspects that were photographed included participants' families, friends, games, people they admire, formal institutions in the community, nature etc.

•Out of the 277 photographs included in the exhibition, 19 pictures (7 percent) were described as "dislikes" or reflected negative perceptions.

•In the dislike or negative category, youth took photos that represented topics such as alcohol, death, violence, and garbage (Truchon, 2007).

FIGURE 2 | Local Newspaper and Youth Participants (Truchon, 2007)

"trails" meant the tangible benefits that would remain with the community after the researcher left.

- Truchon, 2007

3.0 / CASE #2

Description:

Perspectives of water and health using photovoice with youth living on reserve (Bradford, 2017 & Zagozewski & Bharadwaj, 2017*): For this study, researchers facilitated an opportunity for Yellow Quill First Nation youth to share their perspectives on water and health. The research intended to primarily collect youth's perceptions on reserve water in Yellow Quill First Nation. Participants were encouraged to take outdoor photographs of surface water found in their community. Afterwards, participants used their photographs to form water and health themes that would later be displayed on posters for the public.

Timeline: 3 Full Days (June 2012)

Methods:

For this study, researchers partnered with the Saskatchewan Junior Rangers to help facilitate activities. YQFN youth registered to participate in the Junior Rangers program were also asked to participate in the water and heath study for YQFN. In total, the study was comprised of 19 YQFN youth between the ages of 16 and 18. The youth completed four days worth of activities, which first started with an orientation on day one. On the second day each participant was given a 24-image disposable camera. The participants were asked to photograph the things that reminded them of water and health (Bradford & Zagozewski & Bharadwaj, 2017). The project description was intended to be broad, so youth could tailor the research to suit their interpretation. The participants in this study had the ultimate freedom to explore and photography their community. On the fourth-day, the photographs were developed and used to make posters representing health and water on reserve. During this process, youth provided written descriptions for their photos and created links between these photos (Bradford & Zagozewski & Bharadwaj, 2017). To stimulate storytelling, sharing circles were facilitated for a group of four to six participants. All youth participants were asked to present their posters in the sharing circle to their peers. When the study was complete, the posters were then circulated around YQFN community building such as the Band Office, Health Centre, Elder's Lodge, and schools.

Findings

•Images associated with captions were usually "instructive messages about the image" (Bradford et al., p. 186). For example, one participant wrote "please do not litter," with their image.

•Getting the YQFN youth to present their posters was challenging as many felt uncomfortable sharing their perspectives in a group setting.

• Group discussion made it easier for researchers to identify any commonalities between individuals photographs and primary theme.

•Some participants identified the activities they wish they could do on the waters.

•The postervoice activity provided youth with the opportunity to conduct their own thematic analysis of water and health in YQFN.

FIGURE 3 | Completed Water-Themed Poster Board (Bradford et al. 2017)

4.0
LESSONS LEARNED

Don't Assume Responses

In Canada, First Nations youth experience suicide rates five to seven times higher than non-Indigenous peer groups (Baker & Goodman & Debeck, 2017). In comparison, Inuit youth are reported to face even higher rates of suicide – an estimated nine times higher than non-Indigenous peer groups (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019). Existing literature focused on examining the mental health of Indigenous youth tend to portray Indigenous children and youth as "suffering beings" (Truchon, 2007). As a consequence, Indigenous youth are frequently victimized, labelled "at-risk", and overlooked for their resiliency (Truchon, 2007). Truchon (2007) admits that the portrayal of Indigenous youth in Canada (as suffering beings) also ran across her mind before starting Photography as a Talking Stick. Truchon admits that she initially expected the participants involved in the Photography as a Talking Stick project to be unwilling participants and challenging to engage. To much of her surprise, Photography as a Talking Stick resulted in high turnout rates and was greatly supported by community members of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam. Truchon (2007) also assumed that because of the "suffering beings" portrayal of Indigenous youth in media and literature, most of the photographs in this study would represent negative aspects of the Innu youth's lives. What she found at the end of her study was the opposite – over 90% of the photographs represented positive aspects in their lives

Get To Know The Youth

In the Water and Health research project, youth participants felt uncomfortable around their peers and research associates. Bradford et al. (2017) believes the study would have generated better feedback if their was time allocated for participants and research associates to get to know each other outside of the research duties.

Sometime's One-on-One Sessions Work Better

Bradford et al. (2017) found the group setting discussions challenging and uncomfortable for youth. The youth involved in the Water and Health study had considerable trouble presenting their posters to their peers in these sharing circles. Bradford et al. (2017) suggests that one-on-one sessions could have produced better dialogue between the participant and the researcher. In the photography as a Talking Stick project, Truchon (2007) conducted one-on-one sessions with each individual participant and discussed zero challenges with the format.

5.0
CONCLUSION

In an effort to be more engaging with youth and increase the chances of leaving meaningful trails behind, the two research projects discussed in this Case-In-Point offer planners some things to consider. First, how can the practice of storytelling be used effectively in planning processes? Second, how can planning processes make space for storytelling and visual representation? Third, how can professional planners leave meaningful trails behind in Indigenous communities? Photography as a Talking Stick (Truchon, 2007) demonstrated how one photovoice activity transpired into several dissemination events.   The Water and Health project (Bratford et al. 2017) conducted research that sought to understand the YQFN youth's perspectives and ideas for change. Both of these photovoice activities evolved into larger projects than just gathering data. The photovoice activities and the storytelling that emerged brought forth a sense of empowerment and understanding for Indigenous youth.

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