

# Photolanguage: A Process Outline<sup>1</sup>

*Photolanguage* is a set of about 100 photographs, chosen for their ability to elicit a range of responses and interpretations by participants. They are **great** for encouraging group members to think laterally and generate ideas beyond their obvious/first thought.

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The following is a compilation of ideas from a wide range of people (many of whom were participants in workshops) on how Photolanguage might be used, and some of the dangers to avoid.

## Photolanguage can be a Fabulous Training/Learning Tool

Photolanguage is an exciting training/learning method. Its particular value is the way it links with a number of different ways that people learn (some prefer to learn by *hearing*, some by *seeing* and some by *doing*). Used with sufficient caution, Photolanguage can generate some excellent outcomes, including:

- Getting participants talking.
- Aiding the preciseness of communication.
- Helping people focus on the topic.
- Connecting the external and the person; theory and practice.
- Generating a range of ideas.
- Legitimising different interpretations.
- Building acceptance in the group.
- Providing a safety net (eg. talking in the third person).
- Focusing participants away from their nervousness early in a process.
- Breaking down barriers quickly.
- Prioritising participation.
- Providing a point of interest/distraction.
- Creating an expectation about the training approach (eg. photos on the floor gives a different message to photos pinned on a wall).
- Inspiring participants to overcome *blocks*.
- Encouraging participants to listen to others' ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> © Copyright Suzi Quixley 1994 & 2010 (revised). It appears in its 1994 format as a chapter in: Quixley, Suzi (1995) **8 Participatory Training Learning Methods**, ESSQ, Adelaide. (30 pp; ISBN: 0 9587640 3 4).

- Affirming each participant.
- Encouraging lateral thinking.
- Encouraging a mix of intellectual and emotional (*head* and *heart*) thinking.

**Its powerfulness is the very reason why it can be so useful, when applied appropriately ... and potentially destructive, when applied inappropriately.**

## Protecting Against Emotional Escalation

You need to use Photolanguage with some caution. It is inevitable that people make a personal connection with photographs ... that is, the photo often says more to them than they may wish to share in a group setting. In training/group settings, particularly, it is important not to push people to talk about photos beyond their immediate, willing, comments (otherwise, you might unexpectedly find you need to work as a therapist, rather than a trainer!)

The goal of using Photolanguage in a group setting is to **extend** participants' thinking on the topic, rather than to **distract** them from the topic. For this reason:

- I remove the picture of a very tiny baby held in the palm of someone's hand in group/non-therapeutic settings. This is because, early in my use of the method, this photo raised painful personal memories for several participants which distracted them from the topic.
- If there are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) participants in the group, I talk with them **privately** in advance. I explain my idea to use Photolanguage and warn them that (since the photos were taken more than 20 years ago) they may include pictures of people who have died. I offer ATSI participants 2 options - we don't use Photolanguage, or, I remove photos of visibly ATSI people from the selection. (Please note that ATSI participants have often really enjoyed this method, so it is important not to discount the possibility of using Photolanguage simply because there are ATSI participants in the group.)

More generally, it is important to brief people carefully - give simple clear instructions about the association you're asking them to make. In a group setting, it might be useful to repeat these instructions verbally several times, and write them on the board. In a training setting, the framing your instructions in **positive** terms is an important safeguard. For example:

*I'd like you to choose a photo that says something about a great learning experience you once had (rather than a bad experience which might generate memories/problems which need to be resolved within the group), or,*

*Choose 2 or 3 photos that say something interesting about your life **which you don't mind sharing with the group** (when using the exercise in a get to know you format ... note the importance of saying *that you don't mind sharing...* **before** they choose a photo), or,*

*Choose a photo that says something about social perceptions of sexuality (when using the exercise to generate ideas or debate).*

The last example raises another important safeguard in **training** settings. You will note that when looking at an issue area which could elicit very personal responses it was *social perceptions* that were asked for ... that is, perceptions from outside the person. It is critical that you do not ask people to choose photos in response to a very personal question and not to focus on choosing photos associated with feelings. An emphasis on **issues / ideas / content** provides the level of *remove* needed to be able to look, in a creative way, at topics.

**Do not attempt to focus on personal issues or feelings, using Photolanguage, unless:**

- 1. You are an experienced group counsellor. AND,**
- 2. The setting is one which is appropriate for exploring personal issues (ie. a *therapeutic* rather than a *training* group).**

If using Photolanguage as a means of generating debate or ideas, it is important to judge the level of trust in the group. It may be useful to use a **single** photo which everyone interprets in their own way - this reduces the chance of someone *accidentally* making a strong emotional connection with a particular photograph. On the other hand, participants might view this approach as manipulative (ie. the photo has been selected for a specific purpose), and therefore feel threatened. The *one photo* approach might also make participants feel they're being *tested* (like in *ink blot* tests!). A useful way to overcome these barriers might be to visibly select a photo at random from the pack, in front of the group.

Possibly the most important safeguard in the use of Photolanguage is to always provide the **real choice** not to participate. Pressure to choose photos may alienate participants not inclined to visually-based learning, and runs the risk of raising emotions which are beyond the level of skills of the trainer to handle. In particular, Photolanguage may not be an appropriate methodology to use with an **involuntary** group.

**Clearly, Photolanguage relies heavily upon the competencies of the group facilitator/ trainer, for its effectiveness.**

## Using Photolanguage with Individuals

Ideas for using Photolanguage responsibly and effectively **with individuals** are:

- Don't overwhelm the person with a whole pack. It can be useful to pick a few off the top of the pack ... or in a low-trust situation, to ask them to pick 5 or 10 randomly. Even in a high-trust situation, apparently *pre-selected* photos can produce fears of manipulation. Always be willing to offer more photos, again on a *random* basis.

- Negotiate the use of Photolanguage with the person ... this includes explaining **why** you're suggesting using photos and giving a **clear** choice not to use the method.

## Necessary Backing Competencies

Even the most *basic* and *unemotional* use of Photolanguage requires the following competencies:

- Acceptance and valuing of **all** contributions and perceptions as valid.
- Openness to a variety of interpretations (eg. of the same photo).
- Affirmation and celebration of differences!
- High order listening skills.
- Ability to judge the trust level within the group, and the appropriateness of the exercise to the group's needs.
- Ability to set limits; to protect against the exercise generating emotions beyond the focus of the session.
- Ability to give clear instructions.
- Ability to *shut down* and debrief an exercise at the point which is most appropriate (ie. the relevant learning has happened, or the exercise is raising an inappropriate level of emotional response for the setting).

## Possible Applications of Photolanguage

Photolanguage can be used:

- As a counselling tool.
- In staff supervision.
- As a means of values identification.
- As a starting point for training needs analysis.
- As end of course evaluation.
- As a *stop gap* when you run out of content.
- To personalise/develop a topic (... you need at least 1 hour).
- As a means to enable participants to measure their own growth (choosing photos at the beginning and end of a course).
- As a tool in conflict resolution (through which participants can talk in the third person).
- As an *ice breaker/get to know you* exercise.
- For issues discussion (eg. images of single mums).