CASE STUDY

Photovoice in Charleroi: Giving Voice Through Images

Level 2 – Application | Module 2 – Creative and Non-Formal Education Methodologies | Belgium

Country	Belgium (Charleroi, Wallonia)
Title	Photovoice in Charleroi: Giving Voice Through Images
Organiser / Provider	Youth association (fictitious composite, based on participatory arts practices in Charleroi)
Target Group	Young women aged 17–24, NEET, socially isolated, with limited verbal self-expression
Theme / Focus Area	Non-formal education, photovoice, participatory methods, safe learning space, empowerment
Training Level & Module	Level 2 – Application | Module 2 – Creative and Non-Formal Education Methodologies

1. Context & Challenge

Charleroi is one of the most economically marginalised cities in Belgium, with persistently high youth unemployment and significant numbers of young women who are disengaged from both education and employment. Many face compounding vulnerabilities: precarious housing, limited French literacy, social isolation, and histories of institutional mistrust.

The youth association had observed that traditional group workshops — based on verbal discussion and structured activities — consistently failed to engage this group. Young women would attend once or twice, then drop out. Workers identified a critical gap: the absence of expressive tools that did not require verbal confidence, literacy, or institutional trust as prerequisites for participation.

The challenge was to design a participatory methodology that could meet young women where they were emotionally and communicatively — and provide a meaningful, dignified path to self-expression and social recognition.

2. Intervention

Objectives

- Provide a non-verbal expressive medium accessible to young women with limited verbal confidence
- Create a safe, participant-led learning environment grounded in lived experience
- Build collective identity and peer solidarity within the group
- Produce a community exhibition to restore a sense of social visibility and dignity
- Use the process as a bridge toward other learning and support pathways

The Photovoice Methodology

Photovoice is a participatory research and education method in which participants use photography to document, reflect on, and communicate their lived realities. Developed by Wang & Burris (1997), it combines visual documentation with structured group dialogue and community dissemination.

In this programme, participants were given cameras (smartphones with adapted apps) and a series of open-ended prompts over 6 weekly sessions:

- Week 1: “What does your neighbourhood feel like?”
- Week 2: “What makes you feel strong?”
- Week 3: “What would you like others to understand about your daily life?”
- Weeks 4–5: Group dialogue, image selection, caption writing
- Week 6: Co-curated community exhibition at the youth centre

Duration & Actors

- Duration: 6 weekly sessions of 2.5 hours each (total: 15 hours)
- Group size: 10 young women (all completed the full programme)
- Lead facilitators: 1 youth worker + 1 arts educator (co-facilitation model)
- Peer support: 2 former participants served as session ambassadors
- Exhibition audience: 45 community members, local authority representatives, and media

3. Outcomes & Results

All 10 participants completed the full 6-session programme — an unprecedented retention rate for this group compared to previous activities. The following outcomes were documented:

Indicator	Result
Programme completion rate	100% (10/10 participants)
Self-reported increase in self-worth	85% (post-programme survey)
Onward engagement	6 participants enrolled in a digital skills programme within 1 month
Social connection	All participants reported new peer relationships formed during the programme
Community visibility	Exhibition reached 45 community members; 3 local media mentions
Continued contact with centre	8 out of 10 maintained contact with the youth worker 3 months later

4. Learning Points

1. Non-verbal does not mean less rigorous: Photovoice required careful facilitation, structured debriefs, and clear ethical boundaries. The absence of verbal dependency did not reduce intellectual depth — it unlocked it for participants who had been silenced by language-centred approaches.
2. Safe space is built through consistency and co-design: The group’s safety grew from session to session as participants co-created the rules and rhythms. The facilitators resisted the urge to over-structure, allowing the group to define its own pace.

3. Co-facilitation is highly recommended: The pairing of a youth worker and an arts educator created complementary strengths. The youth worker held the relational and emotional dimension; the arts educator held the creative and technical frame.

4. Community exhibition as recognition, not performance: The public exhibition was not designed to showcase skill but to restore social visibility. The act of having their images seen — and taken seriously — by community members was reported as transformative by multiple participants.

5. Ethical exposure requires constant vigilance: Several images touched on poverty, domestic tension, or social stigma. Facilitators developed an ongoing consent protocol — participants re-confirmed which images could be shared publicly at the end of each session.

5. Reflection Questions

For individual reflection or group discussion

1. What creative or arts-based methodologies have you used or witnessed with disaffiliated youth? What made them effective — or not — in that specific context?

2. How do you navigate the tension between giving participants creative freedom and maintaining a safe, boundaried learning environment? What concrete protocols do you use?

3. Photovoice resulted in a community exhibition. In your own context, what forms of public recognition or social reintegration could accompany a creative process?

6. Transferability & Innovation

The photovoice model is highly transferable across contexts and partner countries. Key adaptations to consider: smartphone-based photography lowers the cost barrier; prompts should be co-developed with the local group rather than pre-set; and the community exhibition format must be adjusted to cultural norms around privacy and public exposure.

The innovative dimension of this case is the systematic use of a visual method as both an engagement tool and a pathway to empowerment — rather than as an add-on activity. The methodology is also evidence-based: photovoice has been validated in youth work, public health, and participatory action research internationally.

⚠ Ethical & Data Protection Notice

This case study is a fictional composite constructed for training purposes, drawing on documented photovoice practices in Belgian youth work contexts. No real individuals are identified. All participant references are anonymised. When adapting or implementing photovoice with real participants, practitioners must obtain explicit, informed, and ongoing consent for both participation and image publication, in compliance with GDPR and safeguarding obligations. Images of or by minors require parental/guardian consent.

7. Additional Resources

• Wang, C. & Burris, M.A. (1997) – Photovoice: Concept, Methodology and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment (original academic paper)

• Salto Youth – “What is Non-Formal Education?” (6 min video, EN subtitles) | www.salto-youth.net

• Council of Europe – Arts-Based Methods in Youth Work | www.coe.int

• Photovoice Europe – Youth Participation Through Visual Methods (advanced report)

• Compass – Manual on Human Rights Education with Young People, Chapter on Participation | www.coe.int/compass