

PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY AND CREATIVE WRITING
IN COMMUNITY SETTINGS

THROUGH OUR EYES

A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS



WELCOME

Hello,

The aim of this short guide is to inspire and share some ideas and pointers on using participatory photography and creative writing in different community settings. It draws on insights from two pilot projects working with two diverse community groups: adult ESOL learners across London and older residents (70+) in Tower Hamlets.

We all see the world differently through the lens of our culture, life experience and perceptions. Through taking and sharing photos we can open windows into our worlds, express feelings, exchange perspectives, learn from each other and, in turn, gain a better understanding of one another. With smartphones now widely available, images have become a powerful tool for communication, connection, and learning. Photography not only documents reality but also serves as a creative outlet, expressing thoughts and ideas metaphorically. Creative writing naturally extends from photography, with images acting as a catalyst for self-expression through words.

I hope you will find some inspiration here and if you're interested in collaborating on courses, workshops, or training, or if you'd like more information, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

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WHY PHOTOGRAPHY?

1. Accessible

With smartphones widely available, photography has become an accessible and universal form of communication.

2. Visual literacy

Everyone “reads” images, even if we all see them a bit differently; this makes photography a versatile medium for connection and sharing ideas and perspectives.

3. Helps us understand ourselves and the world

Photography encourages us to think about who we are and see the world in new ways.

4. Builds connections and community

Sharing stories through photos helps us understand each other better and creates more empathy. Working collaboratively, such as planning a poster, display, or even an exhibition, builds community.

5. Health and wellbeing

Photography can be creative, fun, therapeutic and rewarding. It also gets you out and about and interacting with people.

6. Amplifies voices and perspectives:

Photos let us share emotions, tell stories, and reveal narratives and perspectives that might otherwise stay hidden.

7. Encourages critical thinking

Photography inspires us to ask questions, analyse what we see, and think in new ways.

8. Highly versatile

Photography can be adapted for a range of activities, from warm-up exercises to workshops, full courses or research projects.

9. Communicates to a wider audience

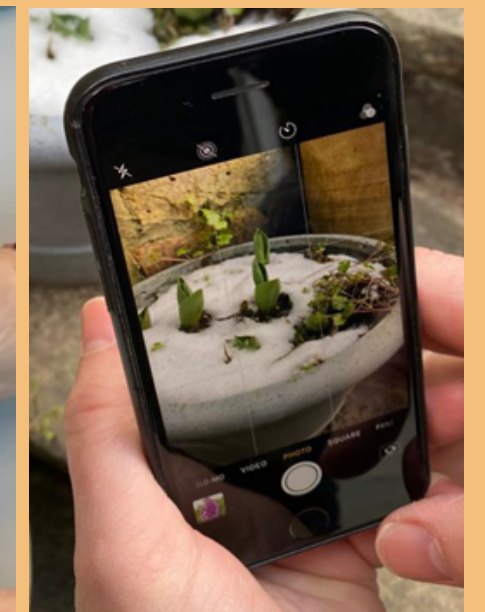
Exhibiting work in whatever form, shares narratives and perspectives to the broader community. Also images travel through space and time.

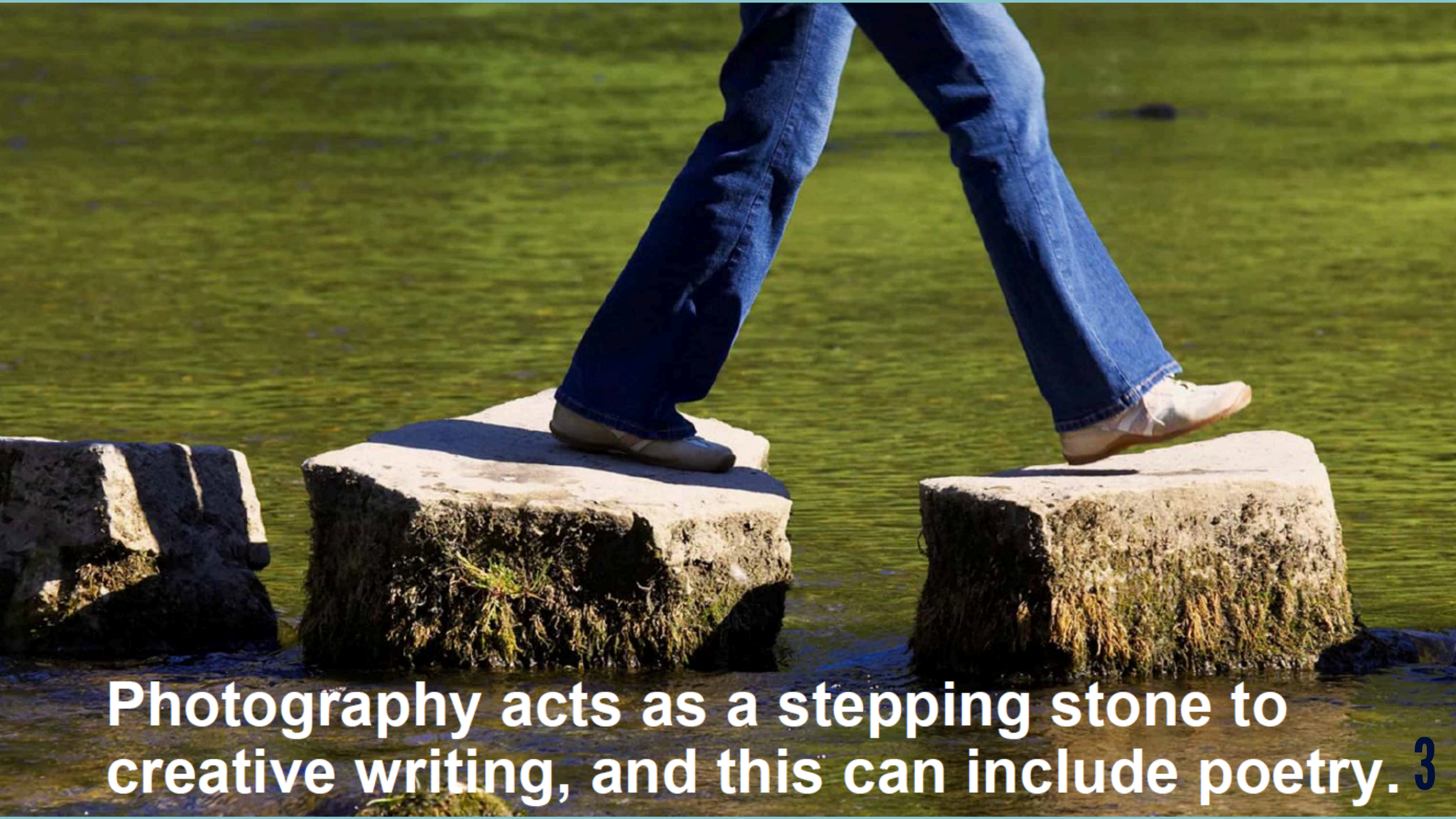
10. Builds new skills

Photography projects or workshops develop technical and creative skills, including IT proficiency, teamwork, presenting, and organising exhibitions or publications.

11. Supports language development

Talking and writing about photos, especially using descriptive language and story telling, accelerates language acquisition.





Photography acts as a stepping stone to creative writing, and this can include poetry. 3



Writing texts to accompany photos is **a natural next step** and can help give pictures context and meaning. When using photos to express feelings, creative writing, including poetry, comes naturally.

WHY POETRY?

1. Provides structure and inspiration

Poetry frames (structured templates) can spark ideas and offer a clear starting point to be creative within defined parameters.

2. Encourages experimentation

Poetry invites play with language, to experiment with form, sound and rhythm.

3. Promotes self-expression

Poetry can be a powerful outlet for emotions, expressing feelings in a succinct and creative way.

4. Connects

Writing and sharing poetry creates a sense of community, connecting through shared and different experiences and perspectives.

5. Accessible and inclusive

Poetry can be straightforward and doesn't require formal writing skills, making it an inclusive way for people of all backgrounds and abilities to engage.

6. Stimulates the imagination

Poetry encourages metaphors and abstraction, thinking outside the box and developing creative skills.

7. Bridges diverse experiences

Poetry transcends language barriers and connects across cultures, an excellent tool for building understanding and empathy.

8. Supports cognitive development

The rhythmic and structured nature of some poetry helps improve memory, recall and critical thinking skills.

9. Creates a sense of achievement

The simplest of poems can give a sense of accomplishment and confidence.

10. Invites collaboration

Participants can co-create or riff off one another's ideas, promoting collaboration and teamwork.


SOME POSSIBLE OUTPUTS



DIGITAL ALBUMS



BOOKS



PROJECTS
PERSONAL OR COLLABORATIVE



MAGAZINE ARTICLES



PRESENTATIONS



ONLINE EXHIBITIONS



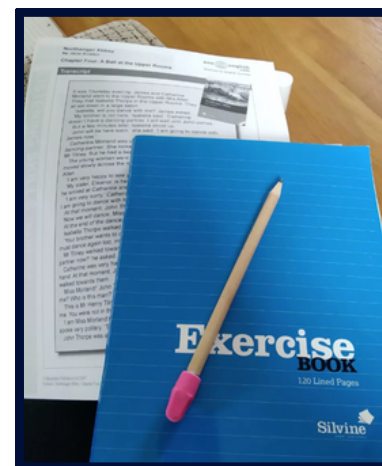
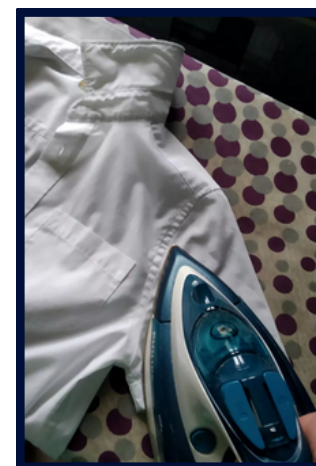
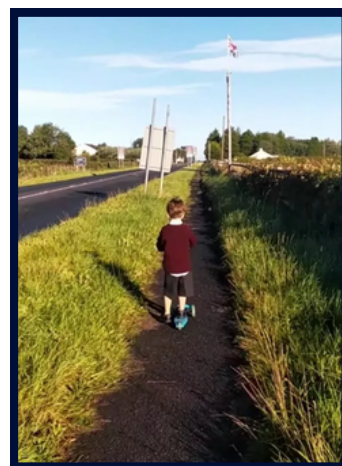
RESEARCH



DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITIONS

IDEAS FOR PHOTOGRAPHY ACTIVITIES 1

with examples of photos from previous projects

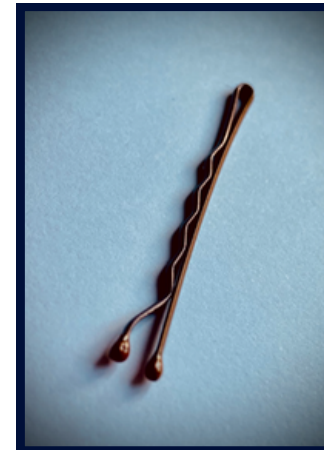
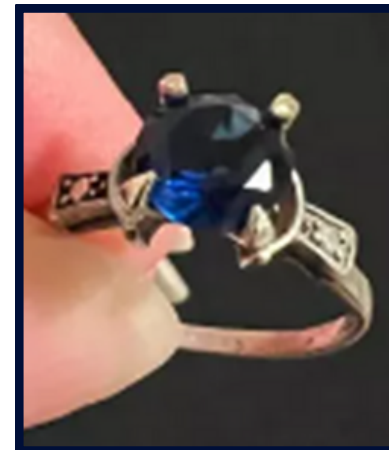
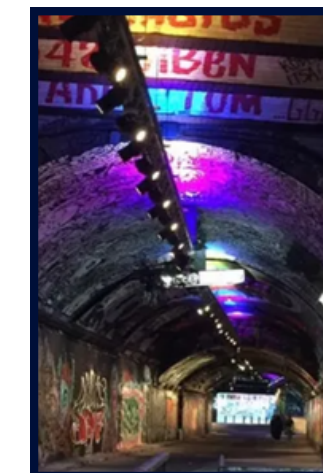
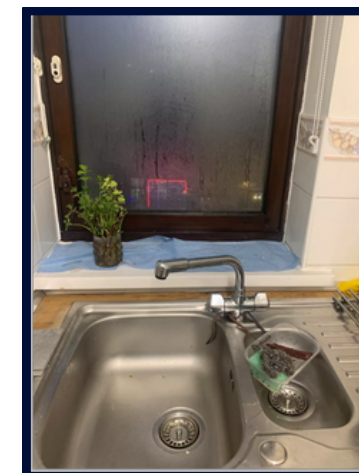
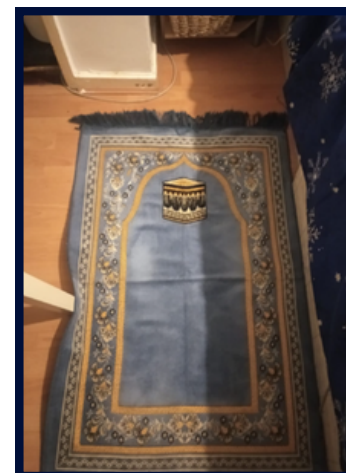


A day in my life

Participants take a few photos capturing a day in their life. You can make a fun group activity of guessing whose day it is, or the time order. This activity helps the group find common ground or explore differences in their daily lives, getting to know each other better and building understanding. It can also be done for special occasions, like a family wedding, sparking even more engaging discussions.

A place

Participants take and/or share a photo of a place—somewhere they go often, somewhere special, or even a place they dislike. Discuss as a group. You can ask participants to describe the places using all five senses, which also makes for a great writing exercise. Another idea is to choose a place familiar to everyone, have them photograph it, and then compare the photos. Discuss why they captured it the way they did for a fresh perspective on familiar surroundings.



An object

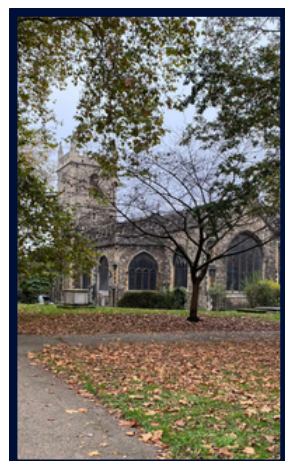
Participants take and share a photo of an object—something special, an everyday object or a specific colour or shape. The group can discuss and possibly write about the objects, learning about different cultures, family histories, or discovering useful items they might want to try. Be mindful of participants' circumstances, such as those who may have fled their home country and left possessions behind, ensuring the activity feels inclusive and sensitive.

IDEAS FOR PHOTOGRAPHY ACTIVITIES 2

with examples of photos from previous projects

Sharing old photos

Participants can share photos from their smartphone albums or bring in old physical photos and albums to share and talk about. Physical photos can be digitised by scanning or taking pictures of them, making them easy to share on a whiteboard or in an online space for just the individual or whole group. With the owner's consent, these photos can also be included in a final project or exhibition.

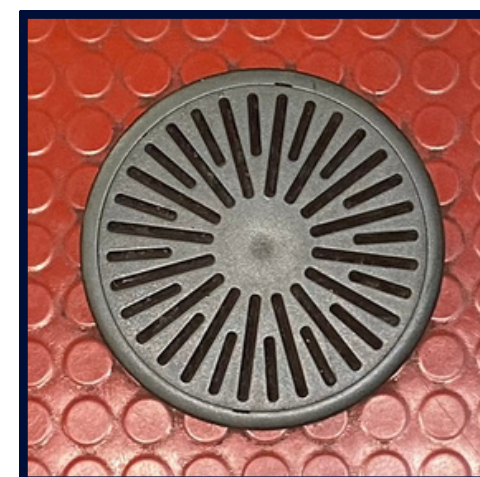
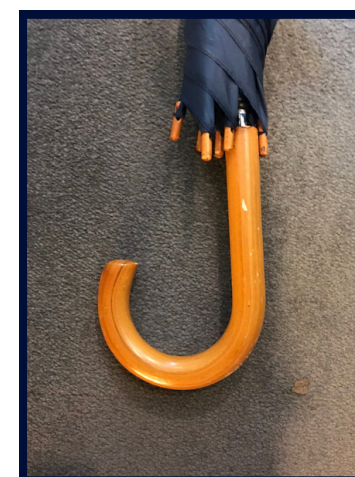


A walk or journey

Participants take photos during a walk or journey to share with the group. It could be a daily route or a less frequent one they enjoy. They can highlight what they love or dislike about the journey. This activity sparks conversations about the local area, shared experiences, and even local history. It's a chance to discuss neighbourhood issues or reflect on the sights, sounds, and smells of the surroundings. This can also be an activity that you do as part of a workshop, going on a walk together and taking pictures on the way. This is an opportunity to be creative and really take in the world around you.

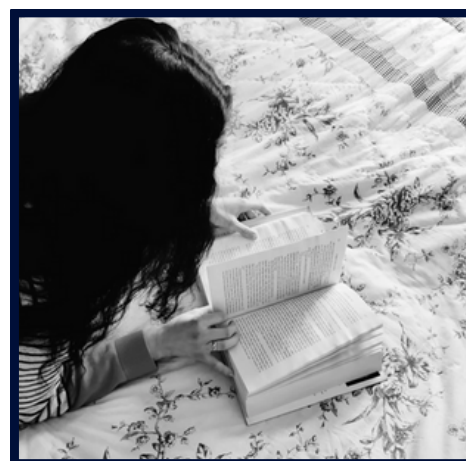
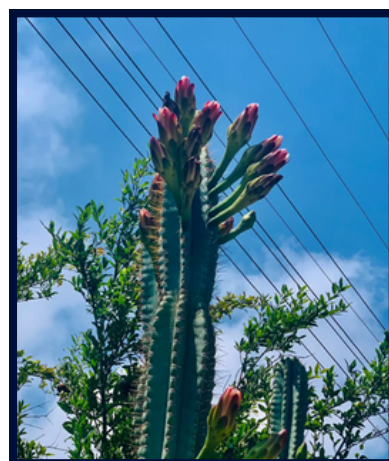
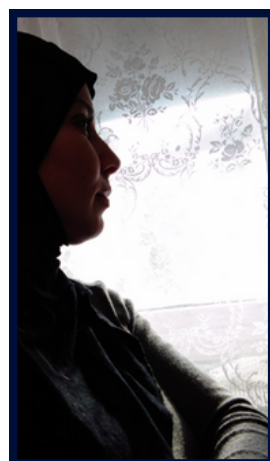
Finding letters of the alphabet in the world around us

Participants search for and photograph objects or shapes that resemble letters of the alphabet—no using actual written letters! This activity encourages careful observation and creative thinking. The group can then use the collected letters to form words or phrases together. A good idea is for the group to choose a word or phrase in advance and assign specific letters for each participant to find. It's a playful, creative way to build teamwork and strengthen group connections.



IDEAS FOR PHOTOGRAPHY ACTIVITIES 3

with examples of photos from previous projects



Portraits

Ask participants to create a portrait of themselves or someone special by taking a photo. It doesn't have to be of the person directly—it can be something or somewhere that **represents** them in some way. Encourage creativity to capture their personality, feelings, history or dreams. This activity is a fun and meaningful way to build connections and empathy while sparking creativity. It also works wonderfully as a starting point for impactful creative writing exercises.

Choose a photo that represents ...

Create a pack of at least 20 photos (or postcards/other images) featuring a variety of things and places. Give participants a topic, headline, viewpoint or word and ask them to pick a photo that represents their thoughts and feelings on the subject. Discuss together why they chose that photo. This activity sparks meaningful conversations and provides powerful insights into personal thoughts and emotions on different topics.



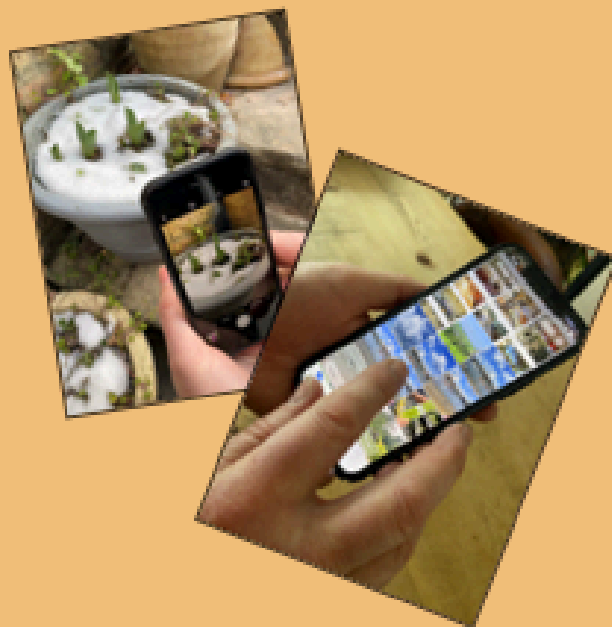
Create a safe and comfortable space



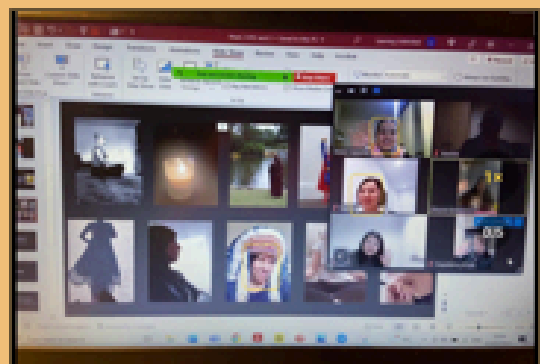
Look at photos and discuss



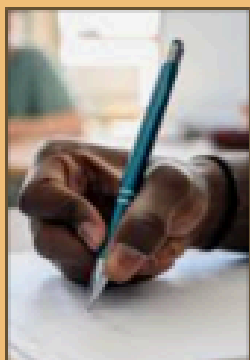
Take photos



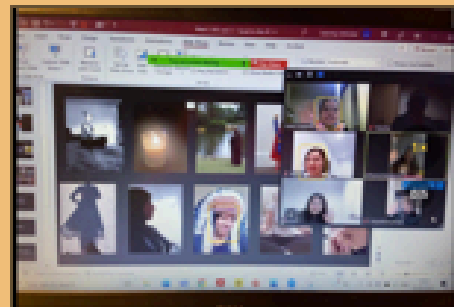
Share and discuss photos



Write



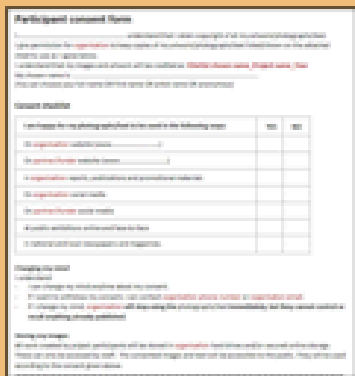
Share with group



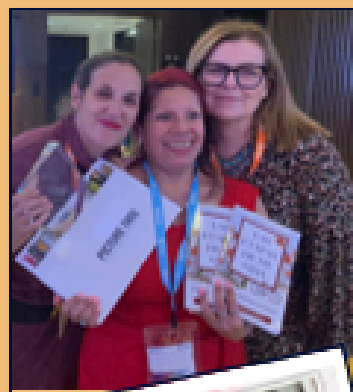
Discuss and agree sharing work with a wider audience (or not!)



Discuss ownership and consent



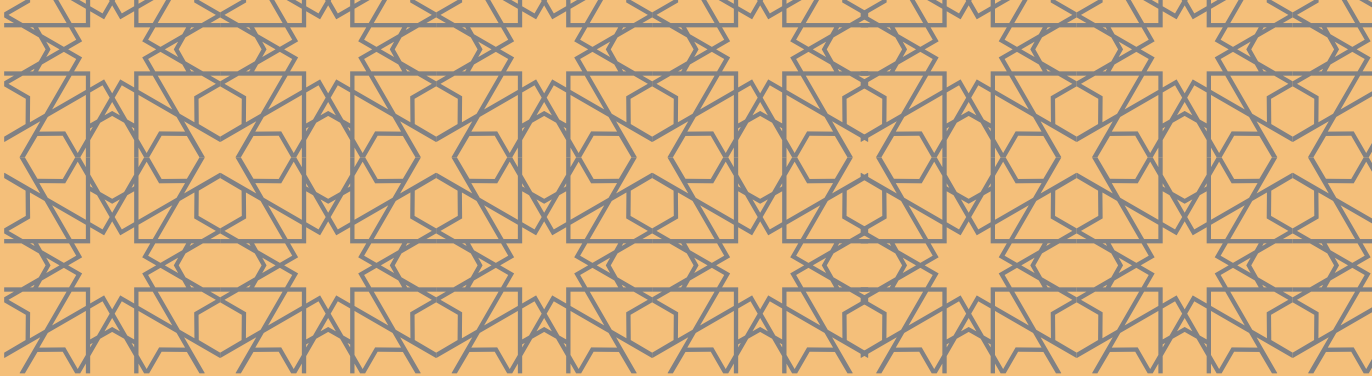
Share with a wider audience (if agreed)



A ROUGH GUIDE TO THE PROCESS

THREE POEMS

Poems come in all shapes and styles, from freeform without rhyme or pattern to structured and formulaic, and from lengthy verses to just a few powerful words. Here are three classic and popular examples:



Acrostic poem

Write a word in a vertical row (e.g. person’s name).
Write words or phrases that describe the person, object or place beginning with each letter.



Hardworking
Enthusiastic
Grateful
Ambitious
Nurturing

Hegan

Place poem

Look at a photo of a place. Use the five senses.
What do you ... see/hear/smell/taste/feel?



The Beach

I see the pale blue sea stretch endlessly, meeting rugged cliffs beneath a boundless sky.
I hear the distant call of seagulls, the rhythmic shimmer of waves kissing the rocks.
I smell the salty sea, mingled with the sweetness of sunscreen.
I taste the tang of salt carried by the breeze.
I feel the soft caress of a gentle wind upon my face.
Here, in this moment, I am free—I am happy.

Haiku poem

Line 1 - 5 syllables
Line 2 - 7 syllables
Line 3 = 5 syllables

Portrait

19 years ago
this beautiful soul arrived
and lit up my world.



Place



Snowflakes gently fall,
park dressed in winter's embrace,
magical white scene.

Object



Pretty rose in bloom,
soft petals, vibrant colours,
nature's sweet perfume.

TIPS AND IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

1. Create a safe space: To ensure everyone feels comfortable to share their photos, stories and perspectives, you need to create a place people feel safe. Start with fun activities to get to know each other and discuss a group agreement together (e.g. listen to each other and don't interrupt, respect each other and be kind).

2. No photo is a bad photo: Emphasise that there are no right or wrong photos. Encourage participants to express themselves freely.

3. Be sensitive to circumstances: Be mindful of participants' situations, e.g. those who may have experienced trauma or are living in temporary accommodation. Choose activities that consider circumstances.

4. It takes time to build trust: Understand that it may take time for participants to feel comfortable sharing or to tap into their creativity, especially if they feel unsure about their abilities or what they want to share.

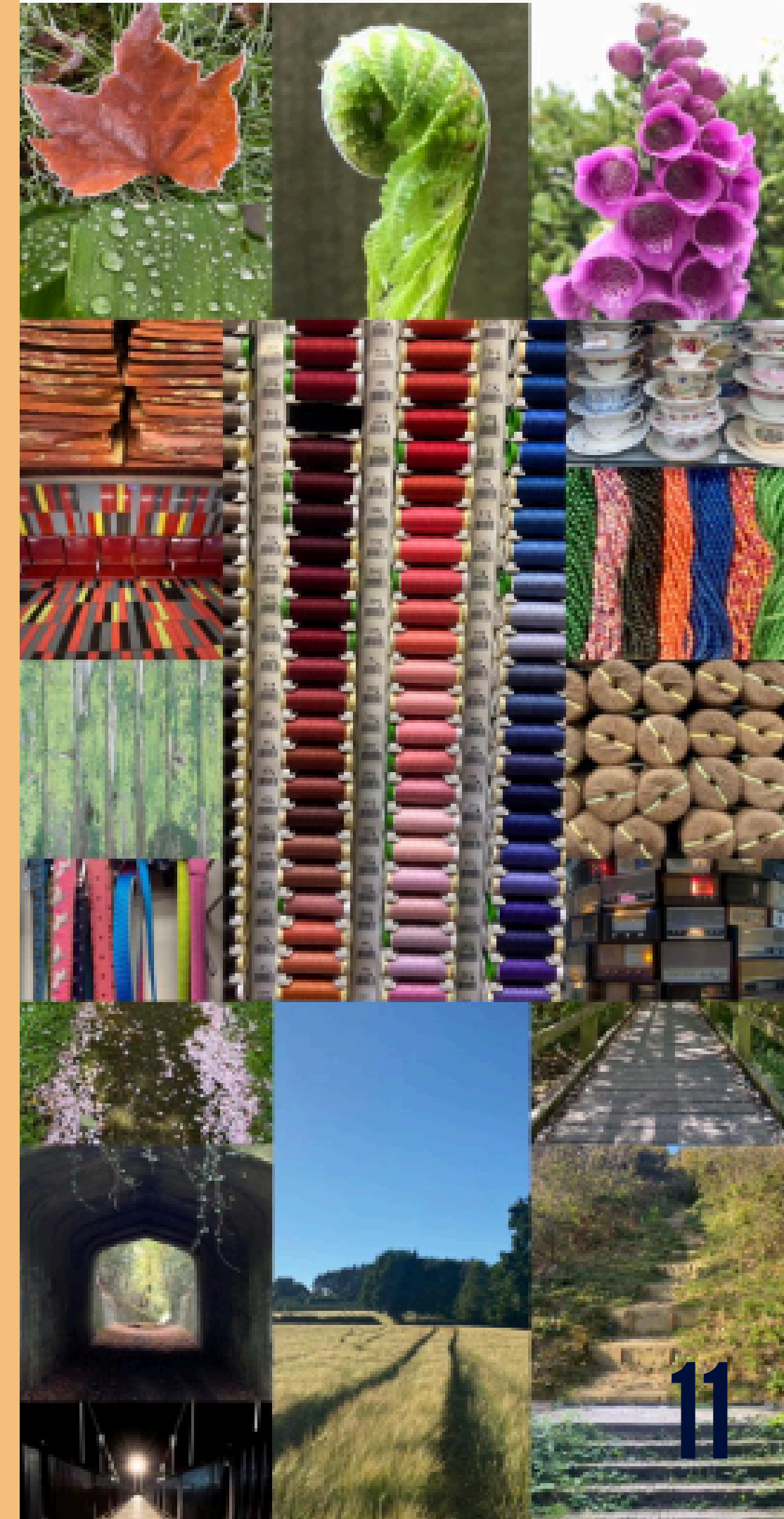
5. Let participants lead: Participatory photography is about giving participants the freedom to tell their stories in their own way, even if it's different from what you expected. If the work is shared with a wider audience, the group should be intricately involved in deciding who, what, where, and when it's shared.

6. Informed consent for sharing: If sharing/exhibiting the work outside the group, ensure participants give informed consent. It is important they understand where and how their work will be shared and who will see it. This applies to both photos and texts. Participants own their images and words and must be comfortable with their work being shared. If other people appear in the photos, the photographer is responsible for getting their consent too. Participants can withdraw consent at any time, but once work is published, it cannot be recalled.

7. LISTEN - THINK CREATIVELY - ADAPT - EVOLVE: Be prepared to change plans. Project outputs and outcomes may not always be what you want or expect, it's the participants that lead the way!

8. Managing and curating content takes time: Be organised and prepared for a lot of images and words.

9. Not everyone has a smartphone: Have an old phone/digital camera as back up for someone who doesn't have a device to use.





With thanks to:

Sara Diva Apolingum, Tony Gomm, Patricia Ruddell, Maureen Swaby
 Ian Wollington, Idea Store Learning
 Ingrid Guyon, Fotosynthesis
 Karen Dudley, Learning Unlimited
 Koreo
 Greater London Authority

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*I felt like I had lost my juice, like this dried up lime
 BUT I think I may have just got it back....!*

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