

## HOW CHILD AND YOUTH-CARE STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND COMMUNICATE THE MEANING OF RELATIONAL-CENTERED PRACTICE: AN EXPLORATORY, QUALITATIVE COURSE-BASED INQUIRY

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### ABSTRACT

This course-based research study explored how child and youth-care (CYC) students understand and communicate the meaning of relational-centered CYC practice. Methodological triangulation was employed, with three concurrent data-collection methods. Participants were given the choice to complete an online survey via email, participate in a Zoom video interview, or participate in a face-to-face focus group. While all three options involved the same set of open-ended questions, the focus group included the added feature of a word-cloud activity and an arts-based “gingerbread man” activity. Thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four main themes: (a) creative artistry, (b) growth through connection, and (c) intentional presence.

**Keywords:** Child and Youth Care, Course-Based Study, Relational Practice.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“Threshold concepts” are the conceptual gateways in a discipline that students must master if they are to think effectively from within a new or complex theoretical paradigm. The notion of discipline-specific threshold concepts was first presented in two seminal papers by Meyer and Land (2003, 2005). According to Meyer and Land (2003, p.3), threshold concepts, once internalized, create an epistemic and ontological shift in the learner. As they explain,

A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. (p. 412)

For Baillie, Bowden, and Meyer (2013), grasping threshold concepts sends a student on a kind journey, transformed by an epistemic shift, as previously inaccessible understandings are realized. Similarly, Tucker *et al.* (2016) state that wholeheartedly grasping a threshold concept,

...involves learning to see some aspect of the world in a new, transformative, and often counter-intuitive manner. Following such transformed understanding, continued and profound learning associated with the concept becomes possible. (p. 150)

### **Relational-Centered Child and Youth-Care (CYC) Practice**

At its very core, CYC is relational work. However, the relational nature of CYC practice provides not only the approach, but rather the ontological core of CYC practice (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010; Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2017), and as such, it is the dominant threshold concept that CYC students must grasp to fully appreciate the nature of relational-centered CYC work. Over their four years of CYC education, students are constantly encouraged to challenge many of the individualistic assumptions that they have built up over time about what constitutes the *self*. This is because the relational ontological foundation of relational-centered CYC practice fundamentally rejects the Cartesian view of human beings as autonomous, ego-based individuals. From a relational ontological perspective, the *self* is ontologically understood to exist in relational processes and therefore as an aspect of relationships. Relational ontology suggests that it is through our relationships with others that we ontologically exist as meaningful singularities (Nancy, 1991; Thrasher, 2015). As Thrasher (2015) further explains, by being with others, we are exposed to who we are as a relating person, and it is in the space of our ontological sense of relationality that we ontologically exist as meaningful singularities. It is, however, important to understand that relational ontology does not deny the place of the individual; rather, it illuminates the significance of relationships by shifting the center of gravity from the individual psyche to its relational matrix (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2017). A second important dimension of relational-centered CYC practice is that it is a deeply intrapersonal process that demands a genuine willingness on the part of the CYC practitioner to engage in *authentic* caring. As such, relational-centered practice urges CYC students to challenge the notion of arms-length boundaries promoted by the more traditional professional disciplines and to enter the relational space with others in an authentic manner that involves getting personal (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2017).

### **Troublesome Knowledge**

However, the dominant discourse surrounding threshold concepts emphasizes the “troublesome” nature of these concepts as an essential characteristic, regardless of the discipline studied. According to Meyer and Land (2003), threshold concepts are fundamentally troublesome to grapple with, as they are demanding and unfamiliar, and mastery does not simply mean progress from difficult to easy, but instead involves a constant struggle. As Dr. Laura Steckley (2020), senior lecturer at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, and researcher of CYC threshold concepts, recently stated,

The difficulties students and practitioners encounter are not only due to the conceptual and practical complexities of relational practice. The above-mentioned unsettled educational and practice boundaries in the field also make relational practice troublesome. The field itself clearly appears to be going through its own threshold process; relational practice is almost universally accepted as centrally important and yet at the same time and as reflected in the data, what it actually is and how it should be enacted is contested (or invisible). (p. 7)

Hence, this course-based research study sought to explore how well undergraduate CYC students understand relational-centered CYC practice and how they explain it to those in related professional disciplines.

## **2. UNDERGRADUATE COURSE-BASED RESEARCH: A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD TO PROMOTE CRITICALITY, REFLECTIVITY, AND PRAXIS**

This section begins with a word about course-based research. The Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster critical thinking, reflection, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, a course-based research approach, in contrast to the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers fourth-year undergraduate Research Journal of Education students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small low-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching. The use of course-based research in higher education has increased substantially in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2014; Harrison *et al.*, 2010). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods are significant for CYC students. First, there is value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge learned in traditional education practice. For example, former students have reported that their engagement in course-based research enabled them to deepen their scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a mentoring relationship; one result is that a greater number of students express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, results generated through course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals and thereby contribute to the discipline's knowledge base. The ethical approval required to permit students to conduct course-based research projects is granted to the course instructor by the university's research ethics board (REB). Student research groups are then required to complete an REB application form for each course-based research project undertaken in the class; each application is reviewed by the course instructor and an REB committee to ensure that the project is completed in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design is the plan the researcher uses to answer the research question and is underpinned by a philosophy, a methodology, and methods. As Creswell (2013) explains, a research design that is well-structured to answer the research questions must be located within a research paradigm congruent with the researchers' ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of the world. The relational-centered ontological assumptions we hold as CYC students regarding the nature of reality and the nature of human knowledge directed our choice to adopt a qualitative research design grounded within the interpretive paradigm.

### **Interpretive Research Paradigm**

The interpretive research paradigm focuses on the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals, rejecting the notion of a singular, objective reality in favor of multiple, constructed realities (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In this view, reality is understood as a social construction shaped by personal experiences and social interactions (Yin, 2013). *The interpretive* research paradigm relies heavily on *qualitative* methodology (Creswell, 2013), which involves asking participants about their lived experiences.

### Qualitative Method

The use of qualitative methods for this exploratory course-based study was appropriate, as the objective was to engage the participants in an exploration of their personal experiences and reflections. The exploratory focus was appropriate, given the aim of the course-based study was not to provide final or conclusive answers to the research questions but to explore the research topic at varying levels of depth (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012; Sing, 2007)

### Statement of Research Question

Relational-centered CYC practice is grounded in relational ontology, which fundamentally alters how students understand themselves and others. Despite having four years of CYC education, many students struggle to articulate the philosophical and practical application of relational-centered CYC practice. Therefore, this course-based research question asks, “What are CYC students’ understandings of relational-centered CYC practice, and how do they articulate the uniqueness of CYC practice to others outside of the field?”

### Sampling Strategy

A non-probability convenience-sampling strategy was employed to recruit CYC student participants from all four years of study on the Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University. Non-probability sampling strategies are any methods of sampling that do not utilize some form of random selection (Bornstein, Jager & Putnick, 2013). Convenience sampling involves recruiting study participants on the basis of their availability (Patton, 2002) and is by far the most commonly used sampling procedure by CYC researchers.

### Data-Collection Method

Methodological triangulation was employed, with three concurrent data-collection methods utilized (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Participants were given the choice to complete an online survey via email, participate in a Zoom video interview, or participate in a face-to-face focus group. While all three options involved the same set of open-ended questions, the focus group included the added features of a word cloud (see Figure 1) and an arts-based “gingerbread man” activity (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. Word-cloud activity responses of the focus group participants

Word clouds, also referred to as “tag clouds” or “term clouds,” are a text visualization tool that generates a visual display of text, where words used more frequently appear bigger or have “more prominence in the representation” (McNaught & Lam, 2010, p. 630). Word clouds are utilized as a pedagogical tool to arouse critical thinking, foster thoughtful discussions, and promote meaningful interaction in online discussion forums (Joyner, 2012). For this course-based research study, the word-cloud feature was used to engage focus group participants in a collaborative discussion. To begin, participants were asked to think of a word in response to a series of prompts (see Figure 1).



**Figure 2.** Gingerbread man arts-based activity responses of focus group participants

McNiff (2007) defines the use of art-based research methods as follows:

the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (p. 29)

The use of an arts-based data-collection method provided participants with another way of expressing themselves in response to the research question. As Dunn and Mellor (2017) explain, arts-based research data-collection methods add value for research questions that draw upon the emotional and symbolic aspects of participants’ experiences.



### Data Analysis Method

We used the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step method of thematic analysis to identify the themes reported in the results section. A fundamental principle of qualitative research within the interpretive paradigm is the search for meaning through what is shared by research participants (Creswell, 2013). During phase one, we familiarized ourselves with the data. Phase two involved the systematic examination of the data through initial coding. We began the coding process immediately following the data-collection stage. In phase three, we begin to search for themes. We brought together codes from three different data sets in constant comparative analysis. Phase four involved reviewing and refining themes, in which initial thematic categories were redrawn so that they captured the relevant data more meaningfully. During phase five, we defined and named the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2012). Finally, phase six involved the production of a research poster to disseminate our research findings. The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of the following four themes: (a) creative artistry, (b) growth through connection, and (c) intentional presence. Each of these is discussed below.

#### a) *Creative Artistry*

The first theme to emerge from the data was the creative artistic aspect of relational-centered CYC practice. For example, one participant commented that, “CYC practitioners could be seen as vulnerability artists.” Another participant inserted the word “creativity” into their gingerbread cookie outline. Other participants inserted the phrases “experience arranging” and “using stories” in the word clouds to communicate the creative methods used to connect with children and youth. Finally, one participant commented, “Every relationship between children and parents benefits from creative novelty, helping families develop new ways of coping, break out of ineffective patterns that do not meet individual needs, and explore alternative responses that are more likely to meet individual needs.”

#### b) *Growth Through Connection*

The second theme to emerge was the notion of growth through connection. As one participant noted, “as CYC practitioners, our own growth is an essential component to enhance the work, and it feeds into helping individuals build the tools they need to thrive throughout different stages of life. Adopting a mindset of continuous growth allows us to create space for curiosity, unlearning, and learning.” Other comments included, “we’re growing and changing with the people we work with,” and, “those life stages and those developmental stages are so specific, and so many different things are happening. To have a really solid knowledge base around what that is, how to help people along, and how to navigate situations to encourage growth.” Similarly, another participant stated, “CYC practice is a therapeutic helping relationship that's very much centered on intentional use of self and seeing people as whole human beings with stories and strengths and weaknesses. Doing your best as an individual to support other individuals in achieving their goals, dreams, health, safety, and all that good stuff.”

#### c) *Intentional Presence*

The third theme to emerge was the importance of being intentionally present. For example, one participant stated, “My understanding of relational-centered CYC practice is that, given the fact that we are all unique and different in our own ways, being intentional in our actions matters. Personally, I believe that if we do things with a purpose in mind, nothing will prevent us from

offering a significant help.” Another participant said, “We work from the human up because it’s very intentional ... and we meet them where they’re at,” with another writing, “an important distinction could be the use of intentionality in practice or the constant implementation of praxis.” Other participants talked about the need to establish connections and to build a nurturing milieu to enhance individual growth,” noting that, “it’s not about just going to “solve” or “fix” the situation.”

#### 4. SUMMARY

This course-based research study has yielded essential insights into the transformative process that most students require to think and practice relationally. Although some students grasp the threshold concept of relational-centered practice with relative ease, others struggle to fully absorb its nuance. The very core idea of threshold concept theory—that threshold concepts are distinctively “troublesome”—highlights that holding space for students to grapple with and work through their conceptual struggles is essential for their learning process. While the participants in this formative course-based study acknowledged important features of relational-centered practice, given the small sample size, there is a need for further research with an expanded sample size and more refined data-collection methods.

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