

CULTIVATING EMOTIONAL SELF-EFFICACY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE THROUGH CHILD AND YOUTH CARE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ARTS-BASED LEARNING ASSESSMENT, "EXPOSING MY INNER GREMLIN"

Christine Pope², Heather Elston¹, Sabrina Rossi¹, Taylor Smith¹, Princess Amakiri¹, Kyle Graves¹, Asha Khehra¹, Mengxi Liu¹, McKenna Jamieson¹, Sarah Balanecki¹ and Gerard Bellefeuille³

¹BCYC, Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

²Assistant Professor, Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

³Gerard Bellefeuille, Professor, Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Located within the interpretive research paradigm, this course-based study aimed to gain insights into students' perceptions of the "exposing my inner gremlin" learning assessment. A convenient and purposive non-probability sampling strategy was used to recruit undergraduate child and youth care (CYC) students at MacEwan University. A two-phase sequential data collection strategy was used to collect different types of data, where the results of the first phase informed the second. The first phase of data collection consisted of a systematic analysis of text and images from two years of online CYC discussion-forum posts and online video-presentations by CYC students. Phase two consisted of a conversational-style focus-group discussion to gain deeper insights into the thematic analysis results of phase one. The data analysis resulted in five main themes: (a) the transformational role of the arts-based gremlin learning-assessment in fostering a sense of community through shared experience, (b) a path to exposing and naming emotions and feelings, (c) journey to the soul—opening windows through vulnerability, (d) the healing power of the arts, and (e) a transformational journey.

Keywords: Arts-based, Child and Youth Care; Course-based Research; Gremlin; Learning Assessment, Qualitative.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book *Freedom to Learn* (1969), Rogers proclaimed that emotional self-efficacy lies at the heart of meaningful and impactful learning. Educators increasingly accept the psychological construct of self-efficacy as a vital element of current educational pedagogy (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). "Self-efficacy" refers to an individual's beliefs and attitudes about their ability to achieve academic success and their belief in their capacity to fulfill academic tasks and successfully learn the material (Bandura, 2006). As self-efficacy theorists, Margolis and McCabe (2006) explain,

If students believe they cannot succeed on specific tasks (low self-efficacy), they will superficially attempt them, give up quickly, or avoid or resist them. Low self-efficacy beliefs, unfortunately, impede academic achievement and, in the long run, create self-fulfilling prophecies of failure and learned helplessness that can devastate psychological well-being. For example, if struggling learners believe that composition writing is impossible for them, that whatever they write will earn a failing grade because they lack

and can never develop the ability to write, they may resist writing by feigning illness, creating diversionary behaviour problems, writing no more than a carelessly created sentence, or completing the assignment in a thoughtless, slipshod fashion. (p. 219)

According to Margolis and McCabe (2006), students with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves with difficult tasks and be intrinsically motivated. They put forth a high degree of effort to meet their commitments and attribute failure to things which are in their control, rather than blaming external factors. These sorts of actions enable them to think critically about how they learn and overcome unhelpful self-limiting prophecies.

The Use of Arts-Based Education to Cultivate Self-Efficacy in CYC Students

Throughout higher education, traditional forms of learning assessment, such as *formal tests measuring discrete knowledge* and essays, are increasingly being augmented or replaced by alternative teaching and learning methods that encourage deeper reflection, critical thinking, and personal engagement (Beghetto, 2019; Burnaford, Aprill, & Weiss, 2001; Schoonen, 2024). Arts-based teaching and learning methods in higher education have been shown, in various disciplines, to deepen the learning experience by simultaneously connecting the cognitive and affective domains, offering an alternative pathway for students to express understanding, synthesize complex concepts and ideas, and engage with the emotional and ethical dimensions of practice (Bellefeuille, Stiller, & Heaney-Dalton, 2024). Arts-based teaching and learning methods are viewed as a powerful, imaginative, and innovative approach to teaching and learning that uses one or more art forms, including the visual arts (i.e., painting, drawing, sculpturing, ceramics, photography, design, crafts, sewing, knitting, carving), the literary arts (i.e., drama, poetry, storytelling), and the performing arts (i.e., dance, music, theatre, filmmaking) to deepen the learning experience by simultaneously connecting both cognitive and affective domains (Bagshaw et al., 2007; Bamford 2006; Bellefeuille, McGrath, & Thompson, 2012; Marshall, 2014; McNiff, 1998). A key assumption underpinning arts-based teaching and learning pedagogies is the belief that creativity is central to fostering self-efficacy because arts-based teaching methods have the potential to generate additional intellectual space to invigorate students' somatic awareness and emotional literacy (Dirkx, 2001). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) argue that education achieved through creative and experiential arts-based methods taps directly into the human experience by inviting the learner to attend to alternative ways of knowing and sense-making, thereby enhancing their emotional self-efficacy. Bellefeuille, Stiller, and Heaney-Dalton (2024) recently released book, titled, *Relational Arts-Based Teaching and Learning: Engaging Mind, Body and Soul*, provides several examples of arts-based teaching and learning methods designed to promote creativity, confidence, emotional expression, and emotional self-efficacy. They are, however, quick to point out that arts-based pedagogy is not about producing fine art or simply completing a set of requirements for an art project: rather, it is an invitation to students to express what they understand, think, and question through the arts. One such example is the arts-based learning assessment *exposing my inner gremlin*, which is the focus of this course-based research study.

Exposing My Inner Gremlin

The pedagogical aim of the “exposing my inner gremlin” learning assessment is to tap into the emotional and creative elements of learning as a way of building emotional self-efficacy, a vital component in student academic engagement and performance (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). The “inner gremlin” in the learning assessment is explained to child and youth care (CYC) students as that persistent inner voice that niggles, whispers, and sometimes even shouts thoughts that lead to feelings of incapability and inferiority, thereby draining motivation, devaluing self-worth, and shrinking self-confidence. CYC students are asked to construct an externalized representation of their gremlin using any form of visual-arts technique or medium such as painting, drawing, sculpture, papier-mâché, sewing, photography, and digital arts (see Figure 1). Following the externalized graphic imagery of their gremlins, students are asked to name the gremlin that captures their character, the tone and nature of the internal messaging, and how it interferes in their day-to-day life and performance as a student. Gremlins are shared in an online course shell through short videos. Students then provide feedback on their classmates’ presentations. They are encouraged to highlight the insights gained and elements of learning that were of particular interest. The purpose of this course-based study is to explore the perceptions of CYC students regarding how the “exposing my inner gremlin” learning assessment reinforced or enhanced their sense of self-efficacy.

Figure 1



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

The undergraduate CYC program at MacEwan University continuously seeks new pedagogical approaches to improve how CYC students are educated for a dynamic, ever-evolving field, incorporating evidence-based curriculum, digital technologies, and arts-based methods, and experiential pedagogies to enhance critical thinking, practice competencies, and prepare CYC

students for complex and diverse practice environments. Course-based undergraduate research immerses students in authentic research projects. It differs significantly from the traditional didactic approach to research methods, which focuses on passive instruction and predetermined outcomes. Course-based research offers undergraduate 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.

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. AN INTERPRETIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is the *overall plan or framework that guides how a research study is conducted* (Bordens & Abbott, 2007). It includes the research questions, sampling strategies, data-collection and -analysis techniques, and ethical considerations (Creswell, 2009). Importantly, a research design is also situated within a research paradigm, as the paradigm provides the foundational, worldview-based framework of beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology) and how knowledge is acquired (epistemology), which in turn guides the researcher's choice of questions, methods, and interpretation of findings (Blaikie & Priest, 2017; Makombe, 2017). The interpretive paradigm is a qualitative approach, which is fundamentally a social constructivist ontology that views reality not as a fixed, external entity but rather as socially constructed through the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lim, 2024). As such, the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research design provided a philosophical fit with the research question of this course-based study.

Statement of Research Question

The guiding research question for this course-based research study was as follows: What are the perceptions of CYC students regarding the impact of the “exposing my inner gremlin” learning assessment on reinforcing or enhancing their sense of self-efficacy?

Sampling Strategy

A convenient and purposive non-probability sampling strategy was employed to recruit the focus group participants for this course-based study. It was convenient in that we spoke with CYC students, and it was purposive because we explored the opinions of third- and fourth-year students who had completed the “exposing my inner gremlin” learning assessment in their second year of study. Convenient and purposive non-probability sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to intentionally select participants with specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics relevant to the research focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data-Collection Strategy

A two-phase sequential data-collection strategy was used to collect different types of data, where the results of the first phase informed the second. The first phase of data collection consisted of a systematic analysis of text and images from two years of online CYC discussion-forum posts and online video-presentations by CYC students. Phase two consisted of a conversational-style focus-group discussion to gain deeper insights into the thematic analysis results of phase one. An arts-based activity also comprised a component of the conversational-style focus group. Arts-based research embraces a wide diversity of methods to provide research participants with more scope to express their own interpretations of the topics in question (McNiff, 2018). It is commonly undertaken in the field of CYC to engage research participants even more closely in the research process (Bellefeuille et al., 2014).

Data Analysis

The Braun and Clarke (2006) method of thematic analysis was used to analyze our data. This six-phase framework is one of the most widely used methods for analyzing qualitative data and is extensively adopted across social-science disciplines (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Campbell et al., 2021). The sequence of analysis consists of six steps: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report. This resulted in the identification of five themes: (a) the transformational role of the arts-based gremlin learning assessment in fostering a sense of community through shared experience, (b) a path to exposing and naming emotions and feelings, (c) journey to the soul—opening windows through vulnerability, (d) the healing power of the arts, and (e) a transformational journey.

(a) The Transformational Impact of the Arts-Based Gremlin Learning Assessment in Fostering a Sense of Community Through Shared Experience

A dominant theme that emerged from the data was the transformative impact of fostering a sense of community among CYC students through the shared experiences of capturing their inner gremlin through art and then sharing it publicly. Supported quotes include:

Listening to my classmates share their gremlins was both humbling and inspiring. It reminded me that self-doubt is a shared experience, even for people who appear confident and accomplished.

Hearing how my classmates navigate their struggles gave me practical strategies I can use, such as practicing self-compassion, reframing negative thoughts, and

focusing on progress rather than perfection. Their courage in sharing their experiences helped me feel less alone and reminded me of the importance of vulnerability and connection in overcoming challenges.

I came to understand that my feelings of self-doubt and concern were not isolated. Hearing my classmates articulate their vulnerabilities through their inner gremlin videos was both enlightening and reassuring.

Watching my classmates' videos and listening to their experiences encouraged me to recognize how, despite each person having a unique and personal gremlin, there can be so much learned and recognized in our own lives by drawing connections. In essence, the use of art can be used as a tool for connection.

Additionally, it was really comforting to look at my classmates' videos and reflections and realize that others feel the same way I do. Knowing that I am not alone in these feelings made me feel more connected and less isolated. It was nice to see everyone being open and honest, which created a supportive environment where we can relate to each other and share what we are going through.

I was surprised by the honesty and vulnerability that everyone showed in their videos, and I think it made me feel less intimidated and my classmates more relatable.

It was interesting to see how unique everyone's gremlin was, yet there was a shared vulnerability in the room. It reminded me that we all carry our own challenges, even if we don't always talk about them. Seeing those struggles expressed so creatively helped me feel more connected to my peers and inspired by their openness.

From this, I also learned that everyone has their unique gremlin, each reflecting different fears and insecurities. This diversity showed me how each person's experience differs, yet we all share the challenge of facing our doubts. This shared experience created a sense of support and understanding among us, reinforcing that we all face self-doubt at times.

(b) A Path to Exposing and Naming Emotions and Feelings

A second dominant theme was the participants' description of the learning assessment as offering a pathway to exposing and naming emotions and feelings by providing a powerful non-verbal form of expression, serving as a safe space in which to explore feelings by physically representing abstract internal states. Supported quotes include:

The activity provides a way to communicate complex emotions without relying on verbal language, making it particularly accessible for individuals who struggle to articulate their feelings.

By naming my gremlin "Turtle in the Shell," I gained clarity on how my fear of judgment and feelings of inadequacy often lead me to retreat into a safe, quiet place instead of stepping into opportunities for growth

By acknowledging our gremlins, we were able to reframe them as symbols of resilience, thereby cultivating a supportive atmosphere that allowed us to connect and empathize with one another.

The activity of exposing my inner gremlin was an eye-opening experience that helped me better understand how self-doubt influences my life. By naming and giving my gremlin a voice, I could clearly see how it affects my thoughts, actions, and decisions, especially during uncertain times. The creative arts offered a cathartic way to express these emotions, allowing me to confront my gremlin safely and constructively.

When I started talking about my gremlin, I noticed that the words I had meant to say came out when I did not over-plan for the execution of the video/process. The journey became the most critical aspect to me, even though I dreaded that part because it felt like what I would say was "ugly" or uncomfortable. However, confronting my fear around sharing what I struggled with helped the concept of talking about it feel much smaller.

My gremlin allowed me to externalize the problem (such as overthinking, insecurity, etc.) and separate it from me and identify the voice and the triggers.

My journey of bringing my gremlin from an inside voice to an outside one was long and meditative. It took me about 15 - 20 hours to make my Gremlin Henrietta because I knit her. I thought about her and what she represented as I moved through each stitch. I could hear her voice forming as I was in my creative process. Through all this, I realized that I have let voices like hers dictate my life for far too long. I valued opinions like hers when I should have listened to my own instead of knowing that my peace in my self-worth was through me alone. When I began to tear up in my video at her cruel words and letting that voice out, it was a moment of clarity for me. How much control did I give her? I want to be able to say I will walk away from this with more courage in my heart and solace in knowing I am enough, but I know that it will still take time. Now that Henrietta has a voice and image I can name, I will be able to silence her when she gets too loud.

By making these emotions their own entity, a being separate from myself, I could better understand and articulate their impact. I explored its voice, how it makes me feel, and how it influences both my personal life and professional practice. Rather than viewing these emotions as intrinsic parts of me, I was able to reframe them as external forces affecting me. I found it much easier to express my emotions about the issues I was experiencing when I used my gremlin as the subject instead of myself.

(c) Journey to the Soul: Opening Windows Through Vulnerability

A third prevailing theme was that the participants felt an overwhelming sense of vulnerability, having revealed aspects of their inner selves to their classmates to see, question, and possibly judge.

While the participants acknowledged that there was nothing wrong with seeking security, they recognized that vulnerability and fear within a supportive learning context created important opportunities for change, growth, and development. Supported quotes include:

This activity is an excellent tool for growth and emotional regulation, but it may also be challenging for some youth. Being this vulnerable and sharing such a personal part of themselves can be difficult, and not everyone may feel comfortable exposing this inner voice. However, the proper support and a safe environment can be a powerful way for youth to process their emotions and build self-awareness.

Listening to my classmates be vulnerable by sharing their inner gremlin, and worries helps me to be more compassionate and caring towards them.

Giving my gremlin a name and externalizing my feelings felt refreshing, as it is so easy to forget that there is more to myself. Watching the videos my peers created with their gremlins was interesting to me because filming my own video made me feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. However, watching the videos of my peers with their gremlins made me feel understood because it made me realize that we all have our own gremlins.

The gremlin activity effectively demonstrates the power of externalization by encouraging participants to use art as a means of expressing and externalizing their emotions or inner struggles. It was neat to see how everyone perceived and represented their inner gremlin. With everyone sharing their gremlin, a sense of vulnerability, which can be very valuable in normalizing emotions and experiences, creating a supportive and empathetic environment.

At first, I felt really nervous about this assignment. Sharing my inner voice, especially the part of me that constantly says I'm not doing enough or meeting expectations, felt so vulnerable. Even though I wasn't presenting it live, just making the video made me overthink if I was "doing it right" or if people would judge me. Creating my gremlin was a powerful process, though. As I worked on shaping its hunched body and giving it those big, critical eyes, I started to feel like I was externalizing the voice in my head. It wasn't just something internal anymore; it became a thing I could see and confront. Posting the video and seeing others' gremlins gave me a whole new perspective. It was comforting to see how everyone's inner voice takes different forms but affects them in similar ways.

(d) The Healing Power of the Arts

A fourth theme was the power of the learning assessment to promote building resilience, improving emotional regulation, and developing better social-emotional skills. Supported quotes include:

A key takeaway I have from the assignment is not to underestimate the use of artistic representation to externalize an issue, as it allows for free expression without the use of words.

This activity highlights how creative arts therapy can shift our focus from overthinking to a more present, detached awareness, supporting emotional regulation and self-reflection.

While I didn't cry, there were moments of intense emotions, and I felt much freer and lighter after I was finished. Seeing my classmates' inner gremlins showed me how personal and revealing this process can be. It allowed everyone to externalize and name their struggles, which made it feel less overwhelming.

Creating my gremlin felt very therapeutic as it gave me an outlet to be intentional with my creation and the impact that the different elements of my gremlin have. It revealed to me how much it really does affect me, as before this, I had ignored her because I thought it invalidated my potential as a CYC worker to have negative, pessimistic, or growth-opposing thoughts

This activity provided me - and my classmates - an opportunity to work with emotions in a non-verbal expressive way. Sometimes, words fall short of capturing the depth of what we feel, and creating something physical, like a gremlin, bridges that gap.

By using creative arts to help them externalize these feelings, we provide them with a non-verbal way to express difficult emotions they might not have the words for.

The benefit of arts-based expressive therapies is that they provide a means of releasing emotions that are preventing you from moving ahead. You can relieve your emotional burden and resume enjoying life without worrying about it by putting them into art or another kind of expression.

Being able to externalize these feelings through an art activity truly helped me confront the fear I didn't even realize I still had.

My gremlin allowed me to externalize the problem (such as overthinking, insecurity, etc.) and separate it from me and identify the voice and the triggers.

Crafting something with my hands is not something I usually embrace, as I have never felt particularly skilled in the arts. Creating my gremlin was a journey—it took me two full days, and I nearly gave up after just a few hours because nothing seemed to turn out right. I kept reworking it over and over again. My arms and shoulders are still sore from the effort, but in the end, despite its imperfections, the result surpassed my expectations. I'm incredibly proud of myself for stepping outside my comfort zone.

(e) A Transformational Journey

A fifth and final theme that emerged from the data was the deep personal transformational power of the learning assessment. Many of the participants talked about going beyond simple knowledge acquisition and supported new critical ways of consciously seeing themselves, resulting in a fundamental change in their personal and professional worldviews. Supported quotes include:

Overall, the experience was cathartic, but not in the way I had expected. I did not think I would be as moved to see others divulge their experiences as I had mine. But it was an

experience that left me feeling much more hopeful and comfortable to know that I was not the only person with a gremlin.

For me, making and posting the video talking about my gremlin for the rest of the class to see was when I let it all out, which is something I would not normally do. That actually did feel kind of freeing, which in a way wouldn't have happened without the physical creation to use as a representation of those feelings. I also found it really fun to see how my classmates saw their own gremlins, and how vastly different so many of them are.

While watching the videos of my classmates explaining their gremlins, I was taken aback by the raw honesty and vulnerability. I saw intentionality, symbolism, self-awareness, deep reflection, and an abundance of creativity. It is comforting to know that we are not alone in our experiences with insecurity. I applaud everyone for their dedication and authenticity.

When it came down to finally getting to a point where my vision for the painting was realized, it felt as though many of these feelings melted away; they were replaced with pride and happiness. As I looked at my gremlin in the face, he felt less of a part of me; he felt like a personification of all my rage, all my shame, depression, and disappointment in myself. He felt like he had less control over me and, in many ways, was something I could work to overcome. Even after sleeping on it, I enjoyed the activity; it made talking about that part of myself on video and in front of others a lot more inviting. Even if it is a part of me, it is something I can overcome and work through; it is a reminder that I am stronger than my gremlin.

The inner gremlin activity was a powerful way to reflect on personal struggles and emotions. It helped me see my challenges in a new light by giving them a physical form, which made them feel less overwhelming. The act of creating and naming my gremlin allowed me to release some of the weight I carry, making the process both creative and therapeutic.

This activity also reminded me of the value of self-awareness. Recognizing the impact of my gremlin on my confidence, relationships, and professional development is the first step toward reclaiming my power. Understanding that I can challenge and reframe these thoughts motivates me to take small steps out of my comfort zone, knowing that growth lies on the other side.

4. DISSEMINATION AND PUBLIC OUTREACH

Effective dissemination of practice-based evidence is an important component of knowledge translation, bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice (Gagnon, 2009; Walley et al., 2007). A public research poster is a standard method of disseminating findings (Briscoe, 1996). This course-based research was presented in the form of a public research poster at a public showcase (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Left to right Kyle Graves, Heather Elston, McKenna Jamieson, Sabrina Rossi, Princess Amakiri, Taylor Smith, Sarah Balanecki, Mengxi Liu

5. SUMMARY

This course-based study explored the perceptions of CYC students regarding the impact of the “exposing my inner gremlin” arts-based learning assessment on their sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy plays a vital role in shaping academic and personal/professional development. It fosters a sense of empowerment and purpose that drives students towards achieving their goals and realizing their potential, while retaining the empathy and understanding needed to avoid disabling self-criticism in an often stressful and challenging academic journey. The findings of this course-based study suggest that the arts-based “exposing my inner gremlin” learning assessment *significantly enhanced the self-efficacy of these CYC students*.

In summary, this course-based study has offered important perspectives on how arts education influences cognitive growth and academic success among higher-education CYC students. It is significant because it explores innovative teaching methods that can enhance CYC education and improve student learning and ultimately practice outcomes.

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