

Faith It till You Make It: A CYC Course-Based Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The purpose of this course-based research study was to explore the perceptions of faith-based child and youth care (CYC) students in completing a third-year expressive arts-based CYC practice self-image assignment that invited them to incorporate their personal spiritual beliefs as a component of their CYC identity. The course-base study also sought to examine the potential of arts-based assignment in creating a safe medium to express one's faith in CYC education. The focus group method was the primary data collection strategy. Thematic analysis resulted in the identification of three themes: a) relational safety within one's environment, b) fear of judgement from classmates and coworkers, and c) desire for authenticity within one's CYC identity. The results of this course-based study indicate that for many CYC students, the arts-based CYC practice self-portrait assignment was a safe place to express their faith and spiritual beliefs.

Keywords: arts-based education, child and youth care, faith-based, relational, qualitative

Introduction

We remember sitting in our first child and youth care (CYC) methods class, amongst a group of approximately fifty other first-year students, and hearing for the very first time the terms ontology and epistemology. The professor went on to explained that relational-centred CYC practice is founded on the ontological (assumptions about the nature of the "self") and epistemological (ways of relating and learning about the "self") views that the "self" is not so much a personal possession but rather a reflection of one's lifelong relational experiences (Bellefeuille, Ricks, & Jamieson, 2012). In simpler terms, the "self" is shaped by being-in relationship not just having relationship. It was further noted that this relational construal of the "self" is in stark contrast with Cartesian ontology (i.e., separation of mind and body), which regards the "self" as an autonomous, self-sufficient, independent human-being who simply interacts with others. Finally, it was stressed that because of the relational ontological foundation of CYC practice, the educational experience that we were embarking upon as CYC students at MacEwan University would indeed be a holistic, collaborative, and experiential journey in which our mind, body, emotions, and spirit are thought to be equally important components of the learning process. Though intrigued about this diverse approach to learning, we remained uneasy with disclosing our spiritual or faith-held beliefs in the classroom. Our fears were based on past experiences of being judged or directly attacked by other classmates that hold preconceived prejudices against religion and even view religion as a threat against diversity and social equality, rather than a positive resource to be used in the service of caring for others. Nevertheless, the significance of a relational ontological approach to CYC education was critical in creating a safe learning environment in which we found the space to explore our faith as a critical component of CYC practice.

The purpose of this article is to report on a course-based qualitative inquiry that explored the learning experience of a group of third-year faith-based students who completed an arts-based CYC practice self-portrait assignment based on the theoretical underpinnings of relational pedagogy.

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Spirituality, Religion, and Faith

Before presenting an overview of the arts-based CYC practice self-portrait assignment and research design, we thought it important to first discuss what the difference is between the term's spirituality, religion, and faith. Despite the obvious fuzzy representation of these three concepts for the purpose of this discussion we settled on the following distinctions.

Spirituality

Spirituality is often defined as a uniquely individual journey towards a greater sense of peace, meaning, purpose and connectedness (Lepherd, 2015; McCarroll, O'Connor, & Meakes, 2005). One of the most wondrous facets of spirituality is that it can be felt and practiced differently by everyone since it is an individual experience, even when beliefs and traditions are shared (Lepherd 2015). For example, spirituality can be about one's devotion to certain religious beliefs and for others an existential quest for meaning by engaging in activities such as yoga, meditation, spending time in nature or creative expression (Rothman, 2009; Weathers, McCarthy, D., & Coffey, 2016). As Walsh (1999) explains, spirituality:

...refers more generally to transcendent beliefs and practices. Spirituality can be experienced either within or outside formal religious structures and is both broader and more personal...Spirituality involves an active investment in an internal set of values and fosters a sense of meaning, wholeness, harmony, and connection with others (p. 6).

Similarly, Canda and Furman (1999) define spirituality as the belief that people can connect with something that is beyond mind and matter:

...spirituality relates to a universal and fundamental aspect of what it is to be human—to search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral frameworks for relating with self, others, and the ultimate reality” (p. 37).

Religion

Religion is equally difficult to define. For some, religion is defined to be the practical expression of spirituality, including specific beliefs and practices (Smith, 1995, p. 893). For others, religion is a "stable cluster of values, norms, statuses, roles, and groups developed around a basic social need" (Smith, 1995, p. 905). Fowler (1981) adds that religion is a personal consciousness or belief of the existence of a supreme being or of supernatural governing the destiny of the individual, humanity, and nature. According to Fowler, religion is a learned sentiment, an acquired value or belief through the rituals of storytelling, symbols, and religious institutional.

Faith

As Hellwig (1990) points out the concept of faith also ranges in meaning from a “general religious attitude on the one hand to personal acceptance of a specific set of beliefs on the other hand” (p. 3). Fowler (1981), a Christian theologian and developmental theorist, goes further by describing faith “as the most generic and most profound process of being human, the process of meaning-making, as faith. Faith, in his conception, is therefore often but not necessarily religious” (p. 321). According to Fowler (1995), faith is a way of knowing that informs one's way of relating to the world. As such, questions of faith that people ask themselves, tend to revolve around what gives life meaning, purpose, and hope.

Relational Ontology and the Creative Use of the Arts in CYC Education

Relational ontology suggest that it is through relationships with others that we discover much about ourselves (Bergum, 2003; Dirks, 2001; Eisner, 2004; Lawrence, 2005). Gergen (2009), for example, makes a case that ontologically “all we take to be real, rational, and good emerges not from individual minds but from relational process” (p. 281). Gergen goes on to explain that “It is not individuals who come together to form relationships; rather, it is out of collaborative action (or co-action) that the very conception of the individual mind comes into existence (or not)” (p. 281). From this outlook, as human beings we create meaning in collaboration with one another.

The implication for education being that social relationships act as a catalyst for learning in the classroom. The central effect of a relational ontological approach to education is described below by Bellefeuille and Berikoff (in press):

Instead of regarding knowledge as information that can be stockpiled within a (disembodied) mind, learning within a relational ontological perspective is understood as the development of embodied ways of knowing or being.....learning through the total being shifts the emphasis from a linear approach based on predetermined expectations (e.g., student achievement) to a holistic view of teaching and learning that focuses on the broadest development of the entire individual. (p.)

Underlying the entire philosophical foundation of relational ontology is the emphasis on the entire learner which is where the arts come into play. As Dirkx (2001) and Lawrence (2005. p.4) similarly maintain, the creative use of arts-based teaching and learning methods create added “intellectual space” that revitalize students’ level of somatic awareness resulting in a richer and deeper learning experience. Recent research on the neuroscience of creativity also supports the notion that creativity is central to human learning asserting a creative learner has greater capacity to engage in alternative ways of knowing (Buffington, & McKay, 2013; Cozolino, 2013, 2014; Marshall, 2014). The neuroscience of creativity tells us that the mind is inherently social and learns within relationships and that physical sensation and emotion are essential components of the mind—as integral to thought and learning as logic is (Damasio, 2003; Levitin, 2006; Parson, 2005; Peterson, 1993; Ramachandran, & Hirstein, 1999).

The CYC Practice Self-Portrait Arts-Based Assignment

As part of a third-year advanced CYC practice methods course that has as its focus the integration of theory, self, and ethical practice, students are required to construct an arts-based CYC practice self-portrait as their final assignment. By tapping into the affective domain of learning, the purpose of this arts-based assignment is to stimulate students’ imagination and creative capacities in their efforts to communicate and critically explore what is meaningful to them in describing their emerging CYC identities. The assignment does not require any artistic training because the goal of arts-based learning methods is not to teach CYC students to be artists but, rather, to create immersive learning experiences that make use of artistic processes to help them gain new insights and perspectives about their learning experiences. Students begin by selecting from a variety of arts-based materials (i.e., paper-mache, clay, cloth, wood, and bottles) to create a figurative self-image (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Figurative self-image

Following the creation of their figurative self-image, students are required to construct a series of backdrop scenes using symbolic imagery to communicate their learning and understanding of the course material. The images are electronically copied and pasted into a Word document and accompanied by a brief explanation (see Figure 2).

Through creative expression and digital storytelling, students often move beyond their everyday academic experience to reveal poetic and imaginative renderings inspired by the inner voices of their deepest selves.



Figure 2. Background scenes

The course is structured around six specific content modules. Students are required to design a minimum of one backdrop scene per module. Together, these scenes create a colorful visual narrative in the form of a storybook. (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Storybook covers

At the end of the course, the storybooks are displayed in a public showcase event attended by students, faculty, and publicstakeholders (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Public showcase

An Undergraduate Course-Based Research Inquiry

The Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster criticality, reflectivity, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, the design and implementation of a course-based approach, in contrast with the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers fourth-year undergraduate students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small minimum-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching.

Use of course-based research in higher education has soared in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille, Ekdahl, Kent, & Kluczny, 2014; Harrison, Dunbar, Ratmansky, Boyd, & Lopatto, 2010). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods for child and youth care students are significant. First, there is value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge obtained in formal education to practice. Previous students have reported that their engagement in course-based research has enabled them to expand their depth of scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a relationship characterized by mentoring, which results in a greater number of students who express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, the results of course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals and, thus, contribute to the discipline's knowledge base.

Ethical approval required to enable 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, which is then reviewed by the course instructor and a sub-REB committee to ensure each project is completed and in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university. The purpose of this course-based research study was to investigate the effectiveness of the expressive arts-based CYC practice self-portrait assignment as a means of supporting students' to openly explore their faith as a component of their CYC practice.

Research Design

A research design is the overarching blueprint that a researcher chooses to carry out a study. It establishes the overall plan or strategy for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data (Creswell, 2014). For the purpose of this course-based study we choose a research design located within the interpretive research paradigm. According to MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford (2001), a research paradigm encompasses three elements: a belief about the nature of knowledge, a methodology and criteria for validity.

The interpretivist paradigm regards reality as subjective and is considers reality to be constructed socially through interactions and founded on the meaning people attach to it (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Accordingly, the notion of "truth" is simply understood as an interpretation of phenomena that is dependent on context and is, therefore, dynamic and evolving (Creswell, 2014; Schwandt, 2000). As a result, the goal of interpretive research is to understand and interpret meaning, reason, and subjective experiences as oppose to generalize and predict causes and effects (Neuman, 2000; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Qualitative methods are therefore best suited as the base of interpretive inquiry (Willis, 2007; Nind & Todd, 2011).

Qualitative Research Methods

Creswell (2014) indicates that the strength of qualitative research is that it is interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Secondly, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argue that qualitative research embodies a broad range of epistemological viewpoints, research methods, and interpretive techniques to increase understanding of human experiences. Thirdly, qualitative research has abilities to understand different people's voices, meanings and events (Richardson, 2012). Lastly, qualitative research relies on inductive reasoning processes to interpret and structure the meanings that can be derived from data (Merriam, 1998). Studying students' experiences in expressing their faith through the use of an arts-based assignment undoubtedly required an approach that would effectively capture the participants subjective experiences and meaning-making.

Sampling Strategy

A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was utilized to recruit participants for this course-based research project. Purposeful sampling is used extensively in qualitative inquiry. It involves identifying and selecting research participants that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of investigation (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For the purpose of this course-based research project, the sampling frame used to guide the participant recruitment process was fourth-year CYC students.

Sample Characteristics and Selection Criteria

Fourth-year CYC students who had completed the arts-based assignment in their third-year of study, self-declare as faith-based, and willing to take part in the course-based study. The target sample size was 20, and the final number was 18.

Statement of Research Question

The spiritual and religious beliefs of CYC students is an area of much complexity and importance for consideration in a relational-centred practice approach committed to understanding and embracing all forms of diversity and difference. CYC students' spiritual and religious beliefs and practices can be a powerful means of strength and support for individuals and therefore should be explored in greater depth and become a consideration for CYC education and practice. The specific course-based research question was: *Do assignments that are grounded in art-based methodology create a greater degree of safety for students within a classroom context in expressing their unique faith identity?*

Data Collection

A focus group was adopted as the primary means of data collection. Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) defines a focus group as a data collection method that allows for complex issues to be explored, generating richer data than individual interviews would elicit. According to Carey and Asbury (2016) the group interaction can also prompts greater depth of information and can lead to greater insight into experiences.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six theoretical steps was used to explore how the course-based research participants experienced in expressing their faith by completing an arts-based assignment. This approach was chosen because of its rigour and flexibility, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). In an effort to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the data that was recorded electronically, it was listened to several times before coding to get a clear picture of all the aspects.

The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of three themes: a) relational safety within one's environment, b) fear of judgement from classmates and coworkers, and c) desire for authenticity within one's CYC identity.

Relational Safety within one's environment

Many of the participants spoke to the need for relational safety and connection within their environment as a prerequisite for the sharing of their faith. One participant stated, "*I am still working on developing a trusting relationship with my new cohort and to feel more comfortable sharing more about my faith*", demonstrating that trust and safety within the cohort are paramount to the sharing or revealing of one's faith. Participants spoke to the personal nature of their faith, disclosing that as faith is a very real and intimate part of their narrative, they desire a safe, relational environment prior to revealing this often sensitive and authentic part of themselves. This requirement of safety seems to go hand in hand with the next theme, fear of judgement.

Fear of Judgement

The fear of being ostracized from one's cohort due to the revelation of faith was a common theme among participants. Many participants expressed their fear that judgement from their classmates would ensue if they were to reveal the true nature of their faith beliefs. One participant stated, "*I was very nervous that I would be judged and questioned*".

One participant spoke to the incongruence that can exist within their cohort regarding the expectation to be accepting and non-judgemental towards clientele in the field, yet this positive regard is not felt or reflected in the classroom setting. There seems to exist a fear of being labelled or placed in a box or questioned as valid, as one participant expressed, “*I was afraid that people would question my beliefs on certain controversial topics*”.

For some participants, this fear of judgement from classmates resulted in their decision to keep their faith to themselves, for others, their faith was such an integral component of their identity that despite the fear of judgment, they choose to be open and honest regarding their faith journey.

Desire for authenticity

Despite the fear of judgement or perceived lack of safety with their cohort, some participants expressed their desire to embody authentic praxis, exercising congruence in who they know themselves to be and who they show up as in the classroom. For example, one participant said, “*I want to be as real as possible because my faith makes me who I am*”. Another participant noted, “*Being a Christian shapes my thinking on how I view the world ... and my faith is what makes me unique as a practitioner*”. Other participants stated that although it can be challenging to express oneself in relation to sensitive topics such as faith, it is foundational to who they are as an individual and as a practitioner and therefore would be impossible and inauthentic to keep hidden. “*This [self-portrait] assignment allowed me to reflect on every aspect of who I am as a person and how I bring my faith with me everywhere I go.*”

Discussion

Faith and spirituality are important aspects of many CYC student’s lives and it is important for CYC students to explore and work out how their personal faith-based beliefs interact with the professional practice of CYC. This course-based research study investigated the potential of arts-based learning assessments as a means of supporting students’ to openly explore their faith as a component of their CYC practice. The findings revealed that for many CYC students, the arts-based CYC practice self-portrait assignment was a safe place to express their faith and spiritual beliefs. While a great deal has been written about culturally responsive teaching in CYC education, very little of the literature includes a discussion about the importance of the integration of faith or spirituality. A commitment to diversity must recognize the role a faith tradition or spirituality may play in how CYC students makes meaning, in the same way that race, ethnicity, and social background in meaning-making are respected in the classroom. Speaking openly, expressing opinions and values, and gaining an understanding of diversity are key values in CYC education. Perhaps arts-based teaching and learning methods can help build a safe environment for CYC faith-based students to explore their faith as a core component of their CYC practice.

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