

Living the Meaning of Praxis in Child and Youth Care: A Course-Based Qualitative Inquiry

MacKenzie Brown

Holly Gautreau

Shazia Dhalla

MacEwan University
Bachelor of Child and Youth Care

Gerard Bellefeuille

Professor
Dept. of Child and Youth Care
MacEwan University, Edmonton
Alberta

Abstract

This exploratory, course-based qualitative study explored the lived experiences of child and youth care (CYC) students and recent CYC graduates who exercise praxis in both the field and the classroom. Data analysis revealed nine themes, which we organized into two categories: the classroom and the work field. The classroom category identified four areas: fear of judgement, assignment structure, different learning styles, and praxis individuality. The work field category consisted of five areas: rigid agency structure, different professional backgrounds, occupational restrictions, confidence levels, and being comfortable.

Keywords: child and youth care, course-based research, education, praxis

Introduction

Praxis is a concept that was introduced to us as first-year child and youth care (CYC) students. It got our heads spinning as we thought about ourselves, others, and the world in new ways. As first-year university students, relatively new to the application of critical-thinking skills and abstract reasoning, we were invited to rethink our desire to “know” and to seek comfort in curiosity, exploration, non-judgmental awareness, and open mindedness. Simultaneously, we were asked to reconsider ourselves as autonomous, self-sufficient, ego-based individuals who are separate from others and to consider a non-individualistic view of ourselves that is formed and lived out through relationships. Additionally, we were prodded and, at times, thrust from our comfort zone into unconventional learning that required taking risks, thinking critically and creatively, and stepping into the unknown. Praxis is a concept that many of us have grown to love and hate, simultaneously. “Love[,] because of the simplicity of its meaning[,] and hate[,] because there is nothing simple about living it out” (comment made by a first-year CYC student in her journal). Over time, however, we not only came to embrace the concept of praxis, but we also adopted it as an ethical obligation because only by focusing on the interconnectedness of our heads, hearts, and souls can we realize the true potential of relational-centred CYC practice.

The CYC Practitioner as an Artist

To help inspire us to embrace praxis as a guiding conceptual framework to promote excellence in CYC practice, we were encouraged to think of ourselves as artists rather than workers or practitioners. As our first-year instructors who introduced the concept of praxis to us suggested, relational-centred CYC practice is a creative endeavour and, as such, should be taught as an artistic enterprise in which students are viewed as artists—much like painters or sculptors—who choose their tools and materials with intention and are free to apply their unique creative abilities (Gerard Bellefeuille, classroom conversation, CYCW 107, 2014).

Conceiving of CYC students as artist implies a different kind of understanding of teaching, one that requires considering a different approach to learning. As Bellefeuille, McGrath, and Thompson (2012) argue, artists have unique ways of knowing and doing that cannot be adequately contained or expressed within the measurable, objective domains of transmission-based educational pedagogies. Such pedagogies depend on methods of rote learning and memorization that generally entail one-way transmission of knowledge from educator to student, the latter of whom is then responsible for regurgitating the material through conventional assessment strategies.

Praxis calls upon CYC students to bring themselves fully into their learning as artists because what might work for one of us may not work for another. We need to find methods and strategies that work best for us because we are all unique individuals. Thus, the subject matter addressed within a course should be adapted to our particular personalities and personal capacities. To be an effective CYC practitioner, each of us must carve out our own CYC philosophy, discover our own unique talents, and learn how to use them. CYC praxis, therefore, amounts to more than the professional skills and knowledge we are taught and practice, it is about inhabiting the “spacebetween” knowing and not knowing. Child and youth care praxis is a being-in-the-moment encounter with curiosity, exploration, non-judgmental awareness, and open mindedness. Engaging with praxis is a deeply intrapersonal meaning-making process that occurs between self and others. Ultimately, this praxis embodies a continuous and dynamic interplay of thought (knowing/non-knowing), being (ethical awareness), and doing (showing up).

The CYC Practitioner as Non-Self

From a CYC relational-centred perspective, the relational-self, or non-self, is an essential feature of praxis (Bellefeuille et al., 2017). This is because CYC relational-centred practice is grounded in relational ontology, which holds that all people are social beings and, as such, one’s sense of self is not a personal possession so much as it is a reflection of one’s relational experiences (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010). This interpretation contrasts with the Cartesian view of human beings, which asserts that human beings, by their nature, are self-interested, disembodied, atomistic individuals. (Bellefeuille & Jamieson, 2008). A relational-centred perspective emphasizes *being as process*. A relational ontological view of “self” posits that individuals are relationally constituted, and it rejects the notion of a bounded being and individualism. One consequence of this approach is that relational-centred praxis does not deny the importance of the individual; instead, it illuminates the significance of personal relationships by shifting “the center of gravity from the individual psyche to its relational matrix” (Churchill, 2011, p. 298). As CYC students, we can’t deny that we found ourselves challenged, at first, with this idea of non-self; however, once we thought deeply about our own lives, it made sense to us that we are in fact products of our relational histories.

Undergraduate Course-Based Research: A Pedagogical Tool Used to Foster Criticality, Reflectivity, and Praxis

The Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster criticality, reflectivity, and praxis, all of which the program considers 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).

The use of course-based research in higher education has increased substantially 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 CYC students are significant. 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 then reviewed by the course instructor and a sub-REB committee to ensure each course-based research project is completed and is in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

Research Paradigm

Our course-based study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm. Paradigms are sets of beliefs and practices characterized by ontological, epistemological, and methodological elements that differentiate their approaches to conceptualizing and conducting research (Weaver & Olson, 2006). The ontological position of the interpretivist research paradigm is relativism, which is the view that reality is multiple, and relative (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In other words, reality is constructed individually; there are as many realities as individuals. Interpretive methodology thus seeks to explain the social world at the level of subjective experience (Creswell, 2013).

Critical Theory

This course-based research project is also informed by critical theory. Like the interpretivist paradigm, the ontological assumption that underpins critical theory is rooted in relativism. For critical theorists, the world is not a universe of facts that exists independently of an observer (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Critical researchers focus on eliminating injustice in society by conducting research that aims to promote critical awareness as a vehicle that can, ideally, transform society by addressing inequality, particularly in the realms of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other socially marginalized elements (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

Research Design

This course-based study utilized a cross-sectional, exploratory, qualitative design. The use of a qualitative exploratory method facilitated the examination of participants' lived experiences in their natural settings (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). This design was ideal because research participants' subjective perceptions constituted the core data of the study (Creswell, 2013). The project aimed to explore how CYC students exercised praxis as students in the classroom and as practitioners in the field.

Sampling Strategy

The sample for the study was drawn from CYC students and recent CYC graduates of MacEwan University whom we considered to have a deep and personal understanding of the concept of praxis. A non-probability, convenience sampling strategy was used in conjunction with an expert sampling strategy to identify potential participants for this research project. Maximum variation was achieved by recruiting second-, third-, and fourth-year CYC students in addition to CYC graduates who are working and who had graduated within the past 4 years. Ensuring maximum variation within a sample population is a good means to control for sample bias (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and to ensure saturation of categories (Glasser, 1978). The variation of the sample was also maximized by including participants from a variety of contexts including the residential care sector, family support services, community-based youth work, school-based settings, government agencies (i.e., child protection), and an "other" category. The variation of participants was further maximized by categorizing participants in three sample frames: frontline or direct practice practitioners, senior administrators and supervisors, and CYC instructors at MacEwan University. A total of 21 individuals participated in the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected from participants through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and a variety of arts-based activities including drawings, music, dance, videos, and other artistic representations (see Figure 1). McNiff (2007) defines art-based research as 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).

A growing number of scholars use arts-based practices to highlight the ontological, epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and representative elements of qualitative research (Angelides & Michaelidou, 2009; Bagnoli, 2009; Leavy, 2009). Leavy (2009) richly describes six core genres: narrative inquiry, poetry, music, performance, dance or movement, and the visual arts.

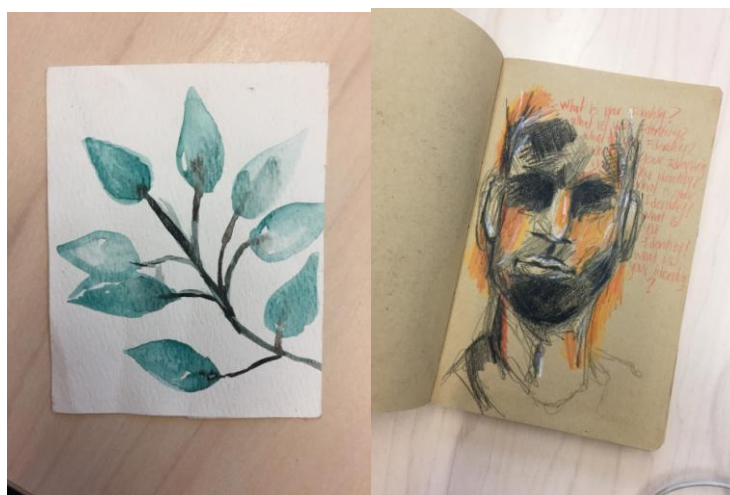


Figure-1. Example of arts-based activity. Figure-2 Example of arts-based activity

Data Analysis

The transcripts were systematically analyzed according to the thematic analysis method described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns (e.g., themes) within data. The sequence of analysis consists of the six processes that are suggested by Braun and Clarke: (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.

Results

The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of nine themes organized under two categories. Each is discussed below.

Category 1: Classroom

Fear of Judgement: *What Will People Think of Me?*

One of the major themes was the participant's fear of being judged by their classmates. One participant identified acceptance as something that we all look for and stated, "*at the end of the day, we are all human beings and we all want to be accepted. It's a basic human emotion, to be accepted. We need to feel it.*" They go on to describe feeling "*boxed in*" in the classroom, and they identified that they struggle with "*stepping out of their comfort zone*" due to their fear of what others may think of them or how they imagine they may be perceived. Another participant supported this view, stating that "*[having] a counteractive opinion that opposes the majority of the class is sometimes hard to say, or to be okay saying it, because it can just feel scary that they'll not approve of it.*" Throughout the discussion about these claims, participants expressed that their praxis was restricted in the classroom as a result of these fears and concluded that harboring fear of judgment was a prominent theme in the interviews. This is summarized in the following participant statement: "*I think there's a lot of pressure or worries about whether you're going to be good enough or whether you should just fit in with what everyone else is doing because there's a security in that; in being like everybody else, but I think praxis is finding that comfort ability in yourself and knowing that it's ok not to be like those people.*"

Structure of Assignments: *Can My Praxis Be Expressed Through This Assignment?*

Another theme that surfaced many times in interviews grounded in how participants felt about being able to embrace their praxis through the structure of assignments. Participants commonly felt their creativity was inhibited when they had to complete assignments in a way that would "*please [the instructors].*" One participant expressed a need to do assignments according to the instructor strict requirements, which would effectively prevent them from embracing their praxis and completing the assignment in a way that felt right. Many participants shared similar experiences, saying, "*it's always difficult in an assignment when there's no room for creativity... like a paper, which can be limiting.*" Another participant mentioned that they, too, found it difficult to bring their praxis fully into their work when they had to "*do something for a mark*" and to do so in a manner dictated by a "*structured syllabus.*" However, not all participants felt restricted by the structured nature of their assignments.

They felt they were encouraged to display their praxis and felt they were able to do so regardless of the assignment's guidelines. For example, one participant said that although some classes were rigid in terms of how assignments had to be completed, they *"never felt like [their] praxis was being smothered."* Another participant stated they felt that *"professors are pretty flexible"* in terms of the forms completed assignments could take; they went on to say that this flexibility *"allows you to demonstrate who you are. And that's a part of praxis—being authentic."*

Different Learning Styles: *What if I Do not Learn That Way?*

Many participants felt the classroom environment did not encourage or facilitate the embodiment of praxis in ways that worked well for students. Experiential learning was mentioned in various ways by participants who believed it was a crucial part of learning, along with being able to fully embrace the components of knowing, being, and doing that constitute praxis. One participant observed that *"it's hard for people to get that whole 'being right there in that minute' piece when it's just [a] boring four walls and sitting in your desk. I think it's hard to get the doing piece, because you're not doing it."* Another concern mentioned in many interviews was that of feeling constrained by the ways in which materials were delivered in class, particularly when *"you're just sitting and listening."* Instructors reading from PowerPoint presentations was a irritation mentioned frequently by participants who found it difficult in those classes to *"have those more involved discussions and integrate your own practice and your own self into that lesson."* Others felt hindered by *"forced creativity"* in the classroom. One participant expressed this concern: *"you can't force something like praxis, and I feel like part of praxis is being creative and figuring out a way to do that, but you can't just tell someone to be creative."*

Unacknowledged Praxis Individuality: *My Praxis Is not big and Flashy!*

Praxis is a deeply individual experience and takes different forms for different people. How individuals apply praxis will vary based on personality, one's level of comfort, and one's individual ability. When asked about limitations in applying praxis in the field, the theme of individualized praxis surfaced. Participants who did not exercise "flashy" or "high energy" forms of praxis felt their quieter forms of praxis were not equally acknowledged in the field. *"For me, I'm also not as inclined to display it [praxis] as much because I feel. . . I tend to get lost in the crowd of everyone else because there're those people with those big voices who are always talking and sharing their opinion and being really out there, which is awesome, but then there are people like me who are, like, 'I don't want to get involved in this.'"* *"I think that everyone is encouraged to have a praxis, but I think that other people are more praised about their praxis, and that makes it discouraging for people who maybe feel like theirs isn't as valued or appreciated."* *"I think it [my praxis] struggles in that some people's praxis shines brighter than other people's praxis, and so I think it's easy to promote the people whose praxis is really bright and flashy... um and they [get] good grades and they get complimented on things and this and that, and for other people where their praxis is more quiet or introverted, or just not as outgoing, I think they have a harder time feeling like their praxis is validated."*

Category 2: Field

Rigid Agency Structure: *Man, These Policies and Procedures Are Rigid*

Another prevalent theme that emerged in interviews identified the need to address the organizational structure, policies, and procedures of CYC agencies. Participants felt that certain agency rules and regulations hindered their ability to exercise praxis. *"There're always limitations [in applying praxis], especially in group care. You want to go with your gut feeling, but policy and procedure wouldn't allow that."* *"The main barrier for me to practice praxis has been work policy."* *"For instance, I work at the [organization] and sometimes I struggle with it because they have such rigid rules and it's so hard to be, like, 'Hey, I'm actually trying to help a kid who's going through something and they're just like, 'No.'"* *"If your praxis isn't in line with the goals of the organization or how they go about things, in that sense it can be really restrictive there."*

Different Professional Background: *So, What Degree Did you Say you Have?*

The experiences of co-workers and other professionals who come from different educational backgrounds also emerged as a theme. Several participants talked about the restrictions they faced in exercising praxis when working with individuals who did not understand the notion of praxis and, or, who worked in disciplines other than CYC. *"There are restrictions because [of] different educational backgrounds and policies and so on, right."* *"I found that some people that are removed from the education don't understand what I'm trying to do, or they do get it, at a superficial level, but they're, like, 'It doesn't work that way.'"*

“Because many of the practitioners don’t know what [praxis] is. So, I would say there’s not a lot of encouragement there.” “I have worked with a lot of organizations that don’t have the educational background, and they just hire anyone because they need the staff. And they provide training, but there’s the disconnect there.” Participants also mentioned that when their supervisors and co-workers had a background in child and youth care, they felt supported in their exercise of praxis “It helps that all of our senior staff at [the organization] are CYC, so we have these strength-based conversations because we all have a shared language and it’s super supported that way.”

Occupational Restrictions: *But What About This Document, and This Meeting, and This Case Conference, and...*

Participants observed that different occupational requirements, such as rules and regulations, could suppress the effective exercise of praxis. One participant said, “we really limit our praxis because what our work becomes about is covering our own butts and justifying what we’re doing, verses actually making a difference.” This participant asserted that many organizations prioritize preservation of the individual workers and organization rather than client wellness. The participant later asserted, “it’s the wrong kind of work. . . . Documents don’t keep kids safe, and yet [many] workers spend 85% of their time writing documents.” Along similar lines, another participant stated, “They think paperwork things are good for them [the clients]. You can write goals for days, but if you don’t know the kid, then those goals don’t matter.” One participant stated that “The main barrier for me to practice praxis has been work policy. . . and not being able to kind of step out of the rigid role that were given.” Across the board, this notion of self and agency structure, self-protection, and justification were prominent themes participants found restricted their praxis: “[In some organizations,] routine is tougher and you’re under legalities and you’re under laws and ethics and all of that, and all of a sudden that is stifling to the praxis process.” This is not to say that rules and regulations were strictly viewed as a negative element; depending on a given organization’s policies and procedures, participants found they could be enabling elements in their ability to implement praxis. As one participant said, “There’s always limitations. . . . You want to go with your gut feeling, but policy and procedure wouldn’t allow that.”

Confidence Level: *Am I Ready?*

Participants consistently noted that one must have confidence in order to effectively execute praxis, particularly in a professional setting: “I think that praxis goes hand in hand with your confidence in yourself. . . I think the knowing part of your praxis is believing in yourself and knowing yourself. Remembering my own strengths and that I can do things.” As another participant put it, praxis is, “not getting into [i.e., getting stuck in] my head and being shy. . . stepping out of my restrictions and comfort zone and being creative in activities and relational building.” Confidence equips us as practitioners to “accept the challenge to be impacted by the things around you.” Stated otherwise, “When you don’t have confidence, you end up doing what everyone else is doing.” Engaging praxis means having the confidence necessary to say and do what you personally feel is right. One participant articulated this idea this way: “Praxis should never feel shady, you shouldn’t feel like you’re doing something wrong.” Praxis is such an individualized thing it may at times seem wrong to others, but it is the level that it feels right to us that truly matters.

Being Comfortable: *Why Try—and Grow—When I Can Just Go with the Flow?*

The last theme we identified was that of comfort. As one instructor expressed it, “If you are feeling comfortable, then you are likely not using praxis; praxis is the opposite of comfort.” Seeking comfort is a natural tendency among practitioners because there is a lot more on the line: “how am I going to think and reflect and respond [i.e., use praxis] when my livelihood is at stake, like, now it’s my salary and job security that might be affected.” Using praxis often means going against the grain and sticking your neck out. As one participant said, “it’s so hard to be the one that doesn’t agree with the way things are being handled.” Praxis does not just happen, it takes “self-motivation to be able to do [i.e., use] it” and, like a muscle in the body, it must be worked and used in order to grow. When people become comfortable, they often become complacent because: “they are comfortable with the job. They’ve been there, they have this preconceived knowledge about what to expect”. As one participant put it, “I think routine, in a good or bad sense, can affect your praxis in, I’m sure, a positive, but also a negative way.” The application of praxis is meant to be a learning experience and an evolving process that may well take different forms for everyone. One participant said it well: “I think it’s really important, at least for me and my praxis, [that I am] able to push the boundaries.” The essence of praxis involves pushing past the temptation to coast in order to do what is needed and benefit clients through practice.

Discussion

The concept of praxis in CYC education operates as a pedagogical lens that can help students explore and critically examine their concepts of self (being), agency (doing), and learning (freedom of not-knowing). The essence of praxis is, therefore, a personal journey of learning to embrace uncertainty and complexity because it is necessary to how we learn and grow. As such, praxis is a deeply intrapersonal meaning-making process. The concept of praxis in CYC education is informed by relational-centred ontology, which assumes that all people are social beings. As such, it is assumed that one's sense of self is not so much a personal possession as it is a reflection of one's relational experiences. Praxis informed by relational ontology involves a deeper interpersonal reflective journey in which knowing, doing, and being are deeply interconnected and inseparable aspects of the same process that prepares students to act with moral courage as they face ethical challenges in the field and to serve as cultural stewards of the CYC profession.

What we gained from this study is the understanding that students are struggling to live the meaning of their practice in the classroom and in practice contexts. While the practice context is a longer-term challenge in regard to embracing the full potential of CYC praxis, which will likely change as more and more CYC grads who have leadership capacities to promote a culture of practice center the field, there is an opportunity to take these findings to the CYC team of instructors at MacEwan University and engage in honest and thoughtful discussions about what students have to say about their experiences in the classroom.

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