A Qualitative Course-Based Pilot Study: The Lived Experiences of Child and Youth Care Students Regarding the Use of Self-Awareness and Self-Disclosure in Their Education

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a qualitative course-based pilot study, a preliminary or "trial run" inquiry into the lived experience of child and youth care (CYC) students. The focus is on the use of self-awareness and self-disclosure as a major component of the students' CYC education. Participants were recruited through a purposive, non-probability sampling strategy. The data collection method employed was an open-ended online survey. The thematic analysis led to the identification of two main themes: 1) building competence in practice, and 2) it is uncomfortable and difficult to push through. Findings from this pilot study highlight several research design issues, including the need to revise the data collection and recruitment strategies. In addition, greater attention should be given to establishing a comfortable and safe interviewing environment.

KEYWORDS: child and youth care, course-based research, self-awareness, self-disclosure, qualitative

I.   INTRODUCTION

Self-awareness and self-disclosure are critical and interdependent pillars of child and youth care (CYC) pedagogy (Bellefeuille et al., 2024; Ricks, 1989; Stuart, 2009). Together, these teaching and learning strategies form a pedagogy of interpersonal reflection, introspection, and self-discovery. Students are required to intentionally examine their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours to gain a deeper and more objective understanding of their inner worlds and actions (Rasheed et al., 2019; Urdang, 2010). Self-awareness and self-disclosure are also considered foundational educational tools for developing ethical practice and enabling genuine connection with diverse populations. These strategies can help prevent burnout and promote ongoing personal growth (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Kalin & Schuldt,1991).

However, a literature review on CYC education revealed a critical gap regarding the potential emotional toll that a strong focus on self-awareness and self-disclosure may take on students' well-being. This gap in the literature seems rather incongruous. CYC education emphasizes learning assessments and activities, such as self-reflection papers, personal statements, journal entries, and classroom and online discussions. These activities create a high level of personal vulnerability among students, who are encouraged to reveal their thoughts, emotions, fears, and experiences in the classroom to their classmates and instructors.

This course-based pilot study was a small-scale preliminary investigation. The aim was to evaluate and refine a proposed research design in terms of the research question, sampling strategy, and data collection methods, before conducting an in-depth course-based study (Fraser et al., 2018; Lancaster et al., 2004).

II.   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. This field is dynamic and constantly evolving. The program incorporates an evidence-based curriculum, digital technologies, arts-based methods, and experiential pedagogies; the aim is to enhance critical thinking and practice competencies while preparing CYC students for complex or diverse environments. Furthermore, course-based undergraduate research immerses students in

authentic research projects. This approach differs markedly from the traditional didactic approach to research methods, which focuses on passive instruction and predetermined outcomes. Course-based research offers fourth-year undergraduate students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small and low-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2010).

The benefits derived from a course-based approach to learning research methods are significant for CYC students. First, there is value in students having 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 students often express an 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, which contribute to the discipline's knowledge base.

The ethical approval that permits 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 the project complies with the ethics review requirements of the university.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study explores the lived experiences of CYC students regarding their perceptions of self-awareness and self-disclosure as a core component of their CYC education. A qualitative research design, informed by the interpretive paradigm, was employed. Interpretive qualitative research designs allow participants to share the way they "interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and attribute (meaning) to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

Research Question

The research question that guided this course-based research was as follows: What is the lived experience of CYC students regarding the use of self-awareness and self-disclosure as a core component of their CYC education?

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants from the first- and fourth-year undergraduate CYC student classes at MacEwan University. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that is widely used in qualitative research, in which researchers recruit participants based on specific knowledge, characteristics, or experiences that are relevant to the research question (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is a method where a researcher selects participants from an easily accessible and available group of people (Koerber & McMichael, 2008; Rahi, 2017).

Data Collection

A quick-response (QR) code was used as the primary data collection method; the code opened to an open-ended questionnaire. This type of QR code is a physical or digital matrix that, when scanned with a smartphone, instantly directs users to a survey that captures detailed qualitative feedback (Davies et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2006; Lourdraj et al., 2025). The QR code eliminates the need to type long URLs, making it a highly effective tool for gathering immediate, in-the-moment insights. These barcode matrixes are often used in retail, dining, education, or event settings (Endres et el., 2024; Thakrar et al., 2019). The questionnaire allows participants to describe their personal, subjective knowledge in their own words, which is crucial for understanding the meaning and structure of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased thematic analysis framework was used to analyze the questionnaire data. Thematic analysis is one of the most widely used qualitative research methods to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022; Campbell et al., 2021). The analysis consists of six sequential 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. The analysis resulted in the identification of two major themes: 1) building practice competence, and 2) it is uncomfortable and difficult to push through.

Theme 1: Building Practice Competence

Participants acknowledged that intentional and skillful self-disclosure is a valuable tool for building practice competence**,** enhancing therapeutic relationships, and fostering authenticity. One participant commented that:

[A]t first, I didn't fully expect how much of our learning would require me to bring my own lived experience into the classroom. A lot of assignments don't just ask "What did you learn?" but ask, "What does this mean for you, and how is your identity shaping how you show up?" That shift has pushed me to reflect deeper than I'm used to, and it's helped me realize that in CYC, who I am isn't separate from how I practice.

Another participant noted that: *When it comes to assignments, I feel like I am increasingly motivated to disclose activities about myself, as I think that reflects my self-awareness. I have found the emphasis on self-disclosure and awareness to be incredibly beneficial to my experience in the program. It helps people connect, feel comfortable with vulnerability, and share in a way that furthers the learning of others.*

Theme 2: It Is Uncomfortable and Difficult to Push Through

Most of the participants shared an awareness that the university's emphasis on self-awareness and self-disclosure was essential for their personal and professional development. However, a few commented that their experiences were uncomfortable and sometimes even threatening. For example, one participant stated:

I was unprepared for the amount of reflection work we would be expected to submit to the teachers for grading, which would include the teacher's feedback on my reflections. It was uncomfortable the first time a teacher supplied my grade and told me they wished I had spoken to a topic I hadn't included at all in my reflection and was not required in my reflection. If anything, this changed how I disclosed my thoughts, knowing if I said what they wanted to hear, I would receive a higher grade and not have to hear them dissect my actual reflections.

Another participant noted as follows:

Well, for me, I get overwhelmed very easily, and since I'd be processing really complicated emotions, it takes a lot of time for me to process things that I don't often think about or haven't thought so intently before. Sure, we're provided the exact amount of time to do work, to have our own time, to spend on hobbies, hang out with friends, relax, etc., but for someone like me who is still struggling, it takes some time to process, especially after those intense moments.

One participant mentioned the university's mental health support services to help students to navigate their classroom self-disclosure activities. They commented as follows:

While MacEwan provides resources for counselling, there needs to be more safe spaces and open doors within the CYCW program specifically, for moving through vicarious trauma and trauma which has been triggered by topics and conversations. While the trigger warnings are appreciated before a class discussing sexual assault on a minor, there has been little effort or space for us to check in post-class or experience, and receive the debriefing required to heal a nervous system that may have just been harmed.

IV.   REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION

This qualitative pilot study was a preliminary inquiry into the lived experience of CYC students regarding the use of self-awareness and self-disclosure as a core component of their CYC education. The study revealed weaknesses in the intended use of a questionnaire, including a lack of depth in the responses and a low response rate. Face-to-face interviewing would likely stimulate natural conversation and facilitate better rapport-building, which could enhance participants' engagement. However, it may be difficult to find CYC students who are willing and able to talk about their experiences regarding self-awareness and self-disclosure as a dominant component of their CYC education.

V.   RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these preliminary results, the recommended approach includes the use of a purposive sampling strategy, which allows the researcher to intentionally select participants with the assistance of course instructors, focusing on specific characteristics that align with the study's objectives. It is also recommended that face-to-face interviews be conducted in a safe and comfortable environment.

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