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## A Qualitative Course-Based Investigation into First Year Child and Youth Care Student's Lived Experience of Self-Disclosure

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**Abstract:** This qualitative course-based study explored the lived experiences of first-year Child and Youth Care students with self-disclosure, a key feature of the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care (CYC) program at MacEwan University. The purpose of the course-based study was to better understand the degree of emotional vulnerability involved in the self-disclosure process for first year CYC students. The data analysis revealed two main thematic categories: “focus on one’s self” including (a) questioning the value and amount of self-disclosure (enough already), (b) feeling vulnerable (no place to hide), and (c) feeling comfortable (it’s all good) and “focus on others” consisting of (d) building a supportive community (feeling connected) and (e) learning from the personal experiences of others (feeling strength). Given the emphasis on self-disclosing as a critical strategy in building the self-reflective capacity of first-year CYC students, the results of this course-based study suggest a need for further inquiry into the method of self-disclosure in the first-year classroom setting.

**Keywords:** Child and youth care, Course-based research, Education, first-year students, Self-disclosure.

### 1. Introduction

Embarking on a journey into post-secondary education can sometimes be a disorienting and overwhelming experience for first-year students. For almost all first-year students, attending post-secondary education means navigating through a complex array of interrelated personal challenges that include forming new relationships, adapting to differing teaching styles and methods of instruction, adjusting to a self-directed learning format, and managing the academic demands of higher education, all the while learning to function as an independent adult (Conley *et al.*, 2014; Mattanah *et al.*, 2010). This potentially stressful life transition from high school to higher education often leads many students to drop out. In fact, research in Canada and the United States shows that “approximately 20 to 25 percent of students leave their program of study in the first year” (Parkin and Baldwin, 2009). Moreover, drawing upon our personal experience as fourth-year child and youth care (CYC) students, we would argue that those who enter helping-related professional educational programs like CYC may experience even greater levels of stress due to the instructional demands for self-disclosure placed on them in their first semester.

#### 1.1. Relational-Centred Child and Youth Care Practice

The main purpose of the undergraduate Bachelor of CYC degree is to prepare students to work with vulnerable children, youth, and families in their life-space within a relational-centred framework (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2012). A relational-centred approach to practice is predicated on the theoretical premise that all people are social beings and that human growth occurs through authentic, mutually emphatic relationships, which presupposes that one’s sense of self is not so much a personal possession but rather a reflection of one’s relational experiences (Bellefeuille and Jamieson, 2008). In other words, “self” is formed and lived out through relationships—a by-product of a relational process. As a result, the classroom is a therapeutic milieu that demands a high degree of openness and vulnerability in which CYC students are encouraged to re-examine their beliefs, biases, and prejudices through self-reflection, introspection, and self-disclosure.

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Hence, the practice of CYC occurs within the context of therapeutic relationships in which the use of “self” is a cornerstone of effective practice: knowing oneself builds practice competence. For this reason, the CYC teaching and learning process leans heavily on altering students’ understanding of the use of self-disclosure, which involves risk and vulnerability on the part of each student. Consequently, there is the risk that first-year students will experience high levels of stress due to sharing personal information about themselves’ concerning their cultural norms, religious beliefs, sexuality, and political values. Thus, while self-disclosure is useful, the potential for students to become emotionally vulnerable is a significant concern. Drawing on our collective experience as students who have completed four years of study in the program, it is our belief that while many students experience no outwardly visible emotional or psychological distress as a result of self-disclosing expectations in the classroom, there are many who struggle silently.

## **1.2. The First-Year Learning Context**

First-year CYC students are required to attend a two-day overnight retreat before their classes begin. The off-campus retreat is designed to foster relationship building and trust among classmates and to prepare them for the self-reflective demands built into most of their courses. From this time forward, first-year students are engaged in a continual process of self-reflection, introspection, and self-disclosure through classroom activities, discussions and assessments. The purpose of our course-based study is to improve understanding of the degree of emotional vulnerability involved in the self-disclosure process for first-year CYC students.

## **2. Undergraduate Course-Based Research: A Pedagogical Tool to Foster Criticality, Reflectivity, and Praxis**

Faculty in the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University are constantly searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster criticality, reflectivity, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. Consequently, the design and implementation of a course-based approach, in contrast to 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 a 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 *et al.*, 2014; Harrison *et al.*, 2010). The benefits derived from the course-based approach to teaching research methods for CYC students are significant. First, there is enhanced value in awarding students authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge obtained in formal education to practice. Past 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 that results in a greater number of students expressing an interest in graduate studies. Third, the results of course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals, and thus contributes to the discipline’s knowledge base.

Ethical approval required to enable students to conduct course-based research projects was 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 course-based research project is complete and in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

## **3. Research Design**

Because of its focus on lived experience, this course-based study was grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which views reality as dynamic and socially constructed. The interpretive research paradigm does not aim to explain cause but, rather, seeks to clarify the meaning of the phenomena of lived experiences. As such, it was a good fit with the aim of our course-based study focusing on the “lived experiences” of first-year CYC students that were asked to self-disclose on a regular basis. Given the interpretive nature of this study, a qualitative, exploratory research design was used as the method of inquiry. The four main research questions that guided the study are the following:

1. How do you feel when you encounter an expectation to self-disclose?
2. What do you think when you encounter an expectation to self-disclose?
3. What does your behaviour look like when you encounter an expectation to self-disclose?
4. What are your thoughts, feelings and behaviour when you listen to your classmates self-disclose?

### **3.1. Research Participants**

A purposive, non-probability sampling strategy was used to select research participants. An invitation went out to all first-year CYC students to participate in this study. Forty-five (n=45) first-year students chose to participate.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

In light of the interpretive nature of the course-based study paradigm, a data collection strategy was chosen that would encapsulate the multi-dimensionality of human experience. As Patton (1997) states, research methods should flow logically from the nature of the research questions raised. As a result, a creative journaling method was used to collect data. Research participants were provided with a journal and instructions to take a few moments at the end of each day to make an entry based on the four guiding research questions. The creative journaling method aims to enable participants to record their lived experiences by using words and other forms of expression to describe their emotions, thoughts, and feelings. The journaling lasted eight consecutive weeks beginning at the start of first-year students' first semester. In the final week of collection, four focus groups were utilized to provide participating students an opportunity to summarize their thoughts on the research.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

Several methods of analysis were considered during the development of this course-based study. We eventually decided that thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) would best reflect our underlying methodological goal—to focus on the interpretation of lived experiences. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a 6-step method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within data.

## **4. Results**

The data analysis reveal two main thematic categories: “focus on one’s self” including (a) questioning the value and amount of self-disclosure (enough already), (b) feeling vulnerable (no place to hide), and (c) feeling comfortable (it’s all good) and “focus on others” consisting of (d) building a supportive community (feeling connected) and (e) learning from the personal experiences of others (feeling strength).

### **4.1. Focus on Self**

#### **(a) Questioning the Value and Amount of Self-Disclosure (Enough Already!)**

For some participants, being asked to self-disclose their personal thoughts and feelings on an ongoing basis felt, at times, that they were simply repeating themselves and were not experiencing any deeper learning. For these participants, there was an expression of uncertainty about what they were self-disclosing as having any real “CYC” value to their classmates. For example one participant stated, “I think when I self disclose, what is everyone else thinking of me and why does my past and history matter so much.”

Another said, “I feel like it’s a waste of time and I’m not actually learning anything - especially when we then get graded on self-disclosure.

#### **(b) Feeling Vulnerable (No Place to Hide)**

A second dominant theme that emerged was feeling vulnerable and fearing judgment from peers. While some participants understood the importance of self-disclosing as significant to their development as CYC practitioners, they expressed concerns about what their peers might think about them. One participant stated, “I feel very anxious and unsure of what to say [when encountering a time of self disclosure]. I often feel that I would become too vulnerable so I usually opt to stay silent”. In a similar vein a second participant shared, “I’m usually thinking I will be judged by others.”

#### **(c) Feeling Comfortable (It’s all good)**

While several participants questioned the validity and purpose of self-disclosure, many others felt comfortable with their peers and considered self-disclosing as valuable to the overall learning process and allowed for a great sense of connection with peers, “I don’t mind the amount we have to self-disclose, it brings us closer together.” Others appreciated the flexibility provided for self-disclosure and reflection. For example, one participant commented, “I am excited to write about myself because I find it easier to write about it than talk about it. I find it comforting to write my thoughts down”. Although there was variance in the level of comfort for personal sharing, the majority of participants were supportive when the focus moved from them to their peers. One participant commented on when they were worried about being judged but instead found “it’s usually not the case and that’s what is very comforting, is to know that others have gone through the same struggles as well.” This connection to others was a central factor for those who were comfortable with personal sharing.

### **4.2. Focus on Others**

#### **(d) Building a Supportive Community (Feeling Connected)**

The thematic analysis revealed that for many of the participants the process of self-disclosure led to an increased sense of being part of a supportive community of CYC students. For instance, one participant noted that, “It feels nice to be trusted with someone else’s story. It’s also really cool to know that we’re not alone on a lot of these struggles and see how others dealt with it.” Several participants used words such as “empathy”, “proud” and “admiration” to describe the process of listening to their peers self-disclose. Another indicated that “I love having peers open up; it makes me feel comfortable to do so myself.” The respectful and supportive process helped create a

mutual respect and understanding for participants both when sharing and receiving personal stories. Not only was there a sense of community being built, there was a sense of learning from each other.

### **(e) Learning from the Personal Experiences of Others (Feeling Strength)**

This theme reflects more about the learning gained from the community built within the participants. The theme of learning from the personal experiences of others was nicely expressed by one participant who stated, "I find it interesting to listen to other people's stories it helps me to understand different parts of their personality and different things about them." Another discussed, "It helps me gain a better understanding of them, which is good."

## **5. Discussion**

In CYC education, students are constantly asked to disclose personal information to their classmates and instructors (i.e., personal experiences, beliefs, values, and attitudes) as a pedagogical approach to facilitate critical learning. This self-awareness approach to teaching and learning is predicated on the notion that individuals bring their own outlooks and worldviews into the helping relationship and that these views can, in turn, obstruct the helping process if they are different from the worldviews of the children, youth, and families being served. CYC educators therefore use this approach to encourage their students to become conscious of the basis and development of their own worldviews. Given the emphasis on self-disclosing as a critical strategy in building the self-reflective capacity of first-year CYC students, the results of this course-based study suggest a need for further inquiry into the method of self-disclosure in the first-year classroom setting. While the benefits of using self-disclosing as a teaching and learning strategy to encourage self-reflection was acknowledged by a significant number of the participants, a significant number of participants also expressed concern with both the amount and type of self-disclosing taking place within the classroom setting.

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