

The Relationship between Praxis and Practice Confidence amongst Child and Youth Care Students

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Abstract

This course-based research project examines the perceptions of child and youth care (CYC) students of the relationship between practice confidence and praxis. The specific research question was: What is the relationship between the concept of praxis, as taught throughout the CYC undergraduate program at MacEwan University, and levels of self-confidence self-reported by CYC student practitioners in the field? An exploratory qualitative research design located within the interpretive paradigm provided the theoretical and methodological framework for the research project. Data was collected using an innovative arts-based method, and a thematic analysis revealed three main themes: (a) authenticity, (b) intentionality, and (c) importance of knowledge. The result of this course-based research project suggest that learning about praxis in the classroom has a significant impact on CYC student's level of self-confidence in the field of practice.

Keywords: arts-based, child and youth care, education, praxis, qualitative inquiry

Introduction

The concept of praxis is introduced to Child and Youth Care (CYC) students in their first year of CYC study at MacEwan University. It is presented as a pedagogical framework to be used by CYC students to develop a more intimate and uniquely personal understanding of their own CYC practice. The concept of praxis comprises a synthesis of three interrelated components: knowing, doing, and being. These teachings reveal a more holistic view of practice as both a science and an art in which we are encouraged as CYC students to think of ourselves as artists rather than workers. The science of CYC consists of theories and methods, whereas the art of CYC is less a matter of what one knows or does and more a matter of who we are as practitioners and our way of being in the world. As White (2012) explains, praxis involves a deep, inter-personal reflective journey in which knowing, doing, and being function as deeply interconnected and inseparable aspects of the same learning process. In contrast to Pink Floyd's popular music video, "The Wall," which portrays education as an assembly line where no potential exists for creativity and sameness and silence is the norm, learning as it develops our capacity as CYC students to act creatively and courageously as agents of change and future leaders in the field. As a result, CYC students are encouraged to enter into and inhabit the space between knowing and not-knowing, to sit with the discomfort of uncertainty, and to challenge their perceptions of learning and knowing, self and other. They are encouraged to think about their CYC education as a deeply intrapersonal meaning-making process powered by curiosity, exploration, non-judgmental awareness, and open mindedness; they are encouraged to avoid the limits of dogmatic thinking constrained by personal opinions and beliefs. This shift from passive learner to self-directed activity engaged learner is not a speedy process.

We needed time to learn how to comfortably occupy the space-between knowing (our current understanding) and not-knowing (rethinking our current understandings). In this course-based research project we took up the idea of praxis confidence. Our primary aim is to explore how exposure to a praxis-oriented educational framework contributed to an increase level of practitioner self-confidence in the field of practice.

Undergraduate Course-Based Research

The Bachelor of Child and Youth Care 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' opportunities 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 a 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.

Research Design

This qualitative, exploratory course-based research project is situated within the interpretive paradigm. Qualitative research informed by the interpretive paradigm is a form of scientific inquiry concerned with meaning and discovery that seeks to promote understanding (Creswell, 2013). Research conducted within this paradigm can be used to describe life experiences and the ways that people interpret and make sense of their experiences (Schwandt, 2000). It is a particularly valuable approach because it seeks to explore new perspectives; when little is known about an area of inquiry. This approach can help uncover insights that derive from exploration that exceeds superficial analysis (Patton, 2002). The philosophical perspective of the interpretive paradigm asserts that reality is socially constructed. Consequently, a phenomenon under investigation may allow for multiple interpretations rather than a single truth that can be determined by a process of measurement. Because truth lies within human experience, interpretive research seeks to gain a deep understanding of a given phenomenon—and its inherent complexity in its unique context (Creswell, 2013). As Diaz Andrade (2009) explains, an interpretive approach provides a deep insight into the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. Interpretive research assumes that reality is socially constructed, and the researcher becomes the vehicle by which this reality is revealed (p. 43).

Research Question

What is the relationship between the concept of praxis as taught throughout the CYC undergraduate program at MacEwan University and levels of self-confidence self-reported by CYC student practitioners in the field?

Sampling Strategy

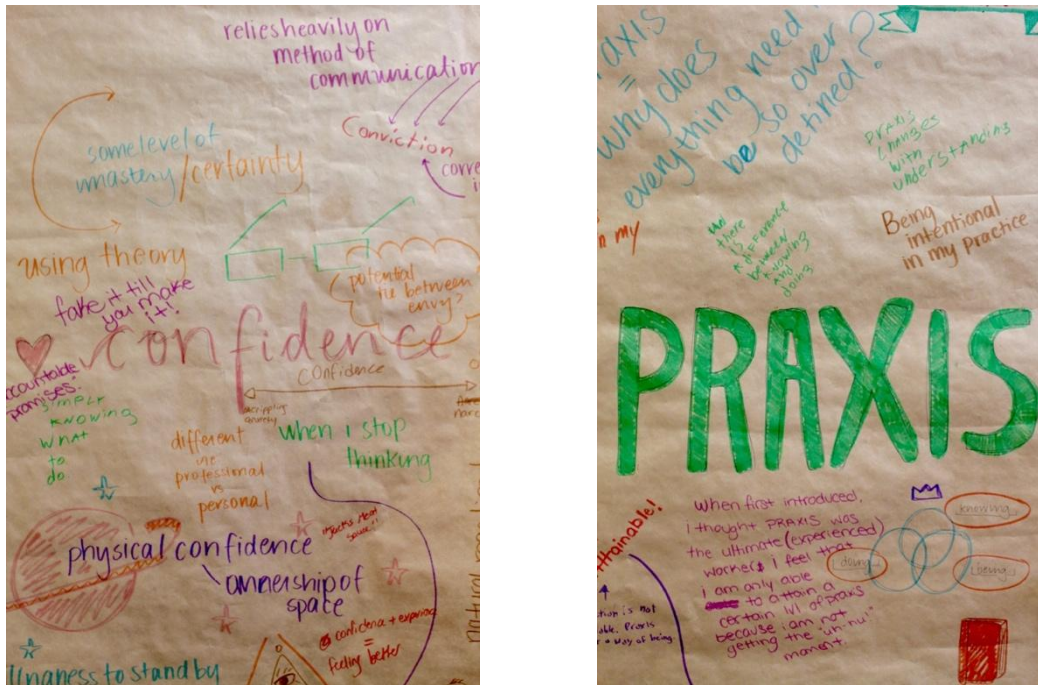
A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was used to identify and select participants. Purposive sampling is defined as the process of selecting individuals, groups of individuals, or institutions based on specific purposes in relation to answering a study's research question (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Our choice of participants was guided by the need to collect information that was pertinent to answering our research questions. A total of seven CYC students participated in the course-based research project.

Data Collection Method

Data was collected at what we advertised as a praxis party. The purpose of the praxis party was to create a comfortable social atmosphere in which participants could mingle together and respond to the research question. In essence, the praxis party was a creative approach to employ the focus group method in a manner that minimized formality through the use of a relaxed setting to discuss the research question. As the discussion unfolded, participants were encouraged to engage in a arts-based mind map activity to visually illustrate their sense of praxis confidence.

The mind map consisted of colours, statements, images, and other creative forms of expressions (see Figure 1). According to Butler-Kisber (2010) a collage is an effective tool because it is easy to use and quickly yields information that can help research participants overcome their fear and hesitation linked to participation because of perceived inability to draw or paint. Butler-Kisber writes that “collage evokes embodied responses and uses the juxtaposition of fragments and the presence of ambiguity to engage the viewer in multiple avenues of interpretation” (p.103).

Figure 1. Mind Map



Arts-based research is defined as “any social research or human inquiry that adapts the tenets of the creative arts as a part of the methodology. . . the arts may be used during data collection, analysis, interpretation and/or dissemination” (Jones & Leavy, 2004, pp. 1–2). The many genres of arts-based research include performance, dance or body movement, music, photography, sculpting, writing, drawing, painting, photography, and collage (Barone, 2009; Bellefeuille, McGrath, & Thompson, 2012; Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009; Diaz, 2002; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008; Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 2007). Influenced by critical pedagogical theories, arts-based research methods stretch the boundaries of research. For Bellefeuille, McGrath, and Thompson (2012) arts-based research methods serve to transcend cultural differences by enabling researchers to break established patterns that frame their research design. An arts-based approach to research design is particularly important in social science disciplines like child and youth care, which is more aptly defined ontologically (through understanding or meaning-making) than epistemologically (by truth or fact). Bellefeuille, Ekdahl, Kent, & Kluczny (2014) make this observation:

We know, for example, that traditional verbal methods of interviewing and questionnaire-based surveys are not very effective means to connect with at-risk and marginalized children, youth, or families. In contrast, creative inquiry offers interesting and innovative approaches to enhance participant engagement and honours the collaborative meaning-making process (i.e., making sense of experiences) that is so central to relational CYC practice. Moreover, the aesthetic dimensions of creative inquiry provide opportunity for enhanced engagement of participants and audiences alike and, in addition, a way to make research accessible beyond the world of academia. This is demonstrated in the broad public interest in the student-research-poster showcase. (p. 3)

Additionally, arts-based methods of inquiry may be useful when generating questions or raising awareness and answering questions that cannot be answered (or at least not fully) when using more traditional research methods (Eisner, 2008).

Data Analysis

Data collected from the praxis party focus group and mind map activity was analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate data analysis technique because it meshes well with the interpretive perspective embraced by our course-based research project. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) authenticity, (b) intentionality, and (c) importance of knowledge.

Results

While describing how the concept of praxis, defined as the dynamic interplay of thought (knowing/non-knowing), being (ethical awareness), and doing (showing-up), has contributed to their level of self-confidence in the field, the following praxis building traits were discussed.

Authenticity

The majority participants reported that authenticity is at the root of praxis. They commented on how becoming more authentic as a result of their commitment to the three core components of praxis reinforced the importance of being themselves, as opposed of being what others wanted them to be or pretending to be someone else to please others. As a result, they felt confident being themselves and trusting their own unique abilities. For example, one participant stated, "*Praxis changes based on an understanding of the concept*" and argued that the understanding and subsequent application of praxis differs between practitioners due to the circumstances that make people unique such as personal experiences, education, religious practices, and cultural backgrounds. Another participant noted, "*Praxis encourages reflective practice and expression of individuality, which keeps my work genuine and honest.*"

Intentionality

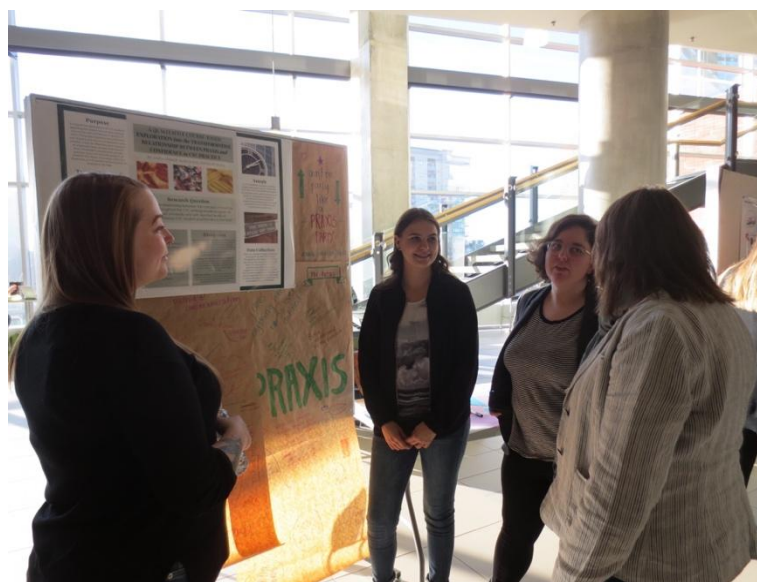
A second dominant theme that emerged from the data was the importance of being deliberate or purposive. Intentionality is the result of the major dynamic interplay of thought (knowing/non-knowing), being (ethical awareness), and doing (showing-up). The participants talked about doing everything with a focused consciousness as they enter a caring encounter with another. Comments such as, "*being thoughtful and having clarity of purpose in determining what to do before doing it*" were made during the focus group discussion. Another participant stated, "*Without praxis, we become complacent,*" and further explained that intentionally utilizing the concept of praxis can prevent practitioners from becoming stagnant.

Importance of Knowledge

A third theme was the importance of being informed. Praxis is about informed action and participants identified a direct relationship between the importance of knowledge and self-reported levels of self-confidence. The participants all agreed that the more educated practitioner appear to have the greatest level of self-confidence. They noted that once they had gained an, "*understanding of the core frameworks and theories*" of CYC, they began to feel more confident in their work. For example, one participant stated, "*Increased knowledge leads to a sense of self-assured certainty.*" While there was an expressed difference of opinion about whether the theory of praxis is specifically linked to the application of theory, there was a collective agreement that the pursuit and willingness to be open to new learnings were incredibly vital to the practitioners overall feeling of competence and self-reported confidence.

Discussion

The course-based study used arts-based research data collection methods to explore the relationship between student's self-confidence and their experience in learning about the concept of praxis. The mind mapping exercise seemed to engage participants and foster creative expression thereby adding to the richness of the data. The findings suggest that learning about praxis in the classroom has a significant impact on CYC student's level of self-confidence in the field of practice. The course-based study was, however, limited by a small sample size and limited to one cohort of fourth-year students. The authors of this course-based study propose that further research being conducted using a larger sample size and expanded data collection process.

Figure 2. Poster Presentation Katherine (left), Randi (centre), Andrea (right)

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