

A course-based creative inquiry approach to teaching introductory research methods in child and youth care undergraduate education

Gerard Bellefeuille
Cassy Ekdahl
Lauren Kent
Miriam Kluczny

Gerard Bellefeuille, Professor, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

Cassy Ekdahl, 4th-Year Student, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University

Lauren Kent, 4th-Year Student, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University

Miriam Kluczny, 4th-Year Student, Bachelor of Child and Youth Care, MacEwan University

Abstract

In this article I present course-based research projects conducted by fourth-year Child and Youth Care (CYC) students at MacEwan University using creative modes of inquiry for both the process by which the research is conducted and for the methods used to represent research data. I address the interconnection between creative inquiry and the meaning-making process that is so central to relational CYC practice and discuss how creative inquiry allows researchers and, or, participants to explore questions and express understanding in ways that represent different ways of knowing.

Keywords: creative inquiry, course-based research, undergraduate education

Introduction

Introductory research courses give undergraduate students their first, and for many, their only exposure to the scientific methods and principles of research design. They are challenging classes to teach to Child and Youth Care (CYC) students because the thought of “researchers” conjures up images of human beings that appear cold, indifferent, objective, rational, serious, and therefore unfeeling and less caring—the antithesis of the warm, caring, intuitive, and empathic relational-centred CYC practitioner. This stereotype presumes that you cannot be both researcher and practitioner. It’s not surprising, then, to hear CYC students voice their views about research methods courses as boring, senseless, and irrelevant to their practice.

Addressing the disjuncture between students’ need to possess the core research skills and knowledge necessary to practice CYC competently and their resistance to learning about research methods constitutes an important pedagogical challenge to CYC educators. The strategy I employed to address this challenge was to move away from the traditional didactic approach to research methods instruction (i.e., transferring information about research methods) to an active learning approach in which students mastered introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing individual course-based research projects.

The other unique strategy I employed was to give students the opportunity to engage in creative modes of inquiry both in the processes by which the research was conducted and in the methods they used to represent research data. For example, all of the course-based research projects entailed some art form or creative expressions—such as collage and portraiture, dance, drawing, poetry, music, photography, or any other form of creative expression—at some point in the research process to generate, interpret, and, or, communicate results.

Where Art and Science Collide

Arts and science are alike in that both are driven by curiosity, discovery, and the aspiration for knowledge of what it is to be human in this world. As Keith Tyson says:

If you allow what is not similar about art and science, and their different methods and processes, to co-exist and thrive, then a real art/science collaboration and aesthetic will emerge. But at the end of the day, art and science are united by one logic and one impulse—both are attempts to understand what it is to be human and the world around us (Koek, 2010, para. 12).

Creative inquiry is an expression of art because its intention is more than a scientific concern with conveying “truth” through the instrumental acquisition, retention, and reproduction of knowledge via proven scientific techniques. Creative inquiry has an aesthetic and ethical dimension that embodies Plato’s characterization of the three realms of “the good, the true and the beautiful.” Creative inquiry as art is portrayed by imagination, creativity, and by its fluidity and flexibility. In other words, by an approach to research that values the process of discovery as much as the discovery itself. To quote Dr. Michael Doser, the experimental physicist on CERN’s cultural board for the arts, “What I find wonderful about working with artists is that they are just

as fascinated by side routes and diversions as they are by the direction in which they are going” (Gaskins, 2012, para. 14).

As a science, creative inquiry is an imaginative, contingent process. It is founded on the constructivist view of knowledge and truth that refutes the existence of an external objective reality independent of an individual who collects or generates that knowledge. Instead, each individual constructs knowledge and his or her experience through social interaction. Creative inquiry is an approach to the human sciences that is ontologically and epistemologically different from the positivist approach that was derived from the empiricism of the natural sciences and directed by a process of empirical and deductive thinking. In creative inquiry, both researcher and research participant share in the journey of exploration.

This collaborative approach to inquiry fits nicely with relational-centred CYC practice, which is more aptly defined ontologically (through understanding or meaning-making) than epistemologically (by truth or fact). 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.

Creativity: The New Frontier in Qualitative Research Methodology

Students coming into CYC education are searching for an opportunity, I believe, to do exciting, imaginative, creative work. By this I mean that they really want to make a difference in the lives of children and families. They want to explore innovative ways to reach and engage youth from diverse, multi-culture backgrounds. They want to acquire knowledge and understanding to develop a praxis that reflects their uniqueness, passion, and commitment to helping others. Yet, all too often, courses in introductory research methods are taught using traditional transmission-based teaching techniques (i.e., lecturing) and conventional learning assessments (e.g., multiple-choice exams, quizzes, academic papers). We know that lecturing is a relatively poor instructional approach for maintaining student attention, which begins to decline after 10–15 minutes. It is not uncommon to observe students during instructor presentations listening to iPods, instant messaging on a cell phone, or on Facebook. I believe that in a profession like CYC, in which students are taught to think critically and to display creativity and innovation in their work, the teaching of research methods by means of a transmission-based method of rote learning is undeniably artificial and limits the true potential of learning.

Emphasis on creative modes of inquiry requires students to think deeply about how they understand, articulate, and engage in CYC research; how they ask and hope to answer questions; and the types of questions they might ask. Creative modes of inquiry offer powerful learning experiences by opening up a meaning-making space that can generate insights and understandings that traditional linguistic-based research methods cannot. In today’s fast-paced

world and ever-changing society—in which we have no idea what the world will look like five years from now—we are going to need more than new knowledge: We will need new ways of knowing. That is what creative inquiry is about.

Researchers and practitioners across academic disciplines are starting to recognize the potential of alternative forms of inquiry that seek to make sense of the increasingly complex and ever-evolving cultural landscape of lifestyles, traditions, and perspectives that make up today's global society. There's a growing movement, within academic circles and professional disciplines, toward using innovative and creative forms of inquiry to promote new ways of perceiving and understanding the lives of people. Consequently, the traditional beliefs about what constitutes research and what counts as evidence are giving way to new understandings of what humans know and how they know it. What this illustrates to me is the deep importance of exploring the potential of creative forms of inquiry as an approach that honours the collaborative meaning-making process that is so central to relational CYC practice.



The following are some examples of this year's course-based research projects as presented by the students.

Example # 1: Crises: How Prepared are You?

Student researcher: Tanya McConnell and Brittany Malo

The purpose of this course-based study was to gauge the extent to which classroom education and the required 2-day training program delivered by the CYC degree program adequately prepared students to deal with a “crisis” situation in a non-physical manner in residential treatment programs. Our qualitative study explored the residential care experience of second- and fourth-year students in the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University. Participants in the study took part in two storytelling focus groups. The only requirements for selection to participate in the study involved having participated in or witnessed a “crisis” at a residential care setting. Storytelling was used as a data collection strategy because it is a powerful and ancient means of embodying understandings and meaning-making. More importantly, storytelling does not require specialized knowledge or skills to connect with or derive meaning and is an effective and engaging means of communication. The common theme revealed in our study was that students did feel as prepared as possible to deal with a crisis.

Example # 2: Experiences of Grief and Loss
Student researcher: Cassandra Ekdahl



As a fourth-year Child and Youth Care student, I am very interested in working with children, youth, and families who are particularly struggling with grief and loss. I saw the course-based research project as an opportunity to conduct a qualitative, exploratory inquiry that focused on what CYC students experience emotionally when supporting children, youth, and families going through situations of grief and loss. I facilitated a one-and-a-half hour focus group, with 8 fourth-year CYC participants, to discover what their experiences with grief and loss looked like. Insights I hoped to achieve included whether or not my classmates felt prepared

to deal with grief and loss; what grief and loss looked like to them; how my classmates felt when supporting children, youth, and families who were experiencing grief and loss; and whether the MacEwan University CYC program played a crucial role in preparing students to deal with situations of grief and loss.

This project allowed me the opportunity to practice sorting through the layers and layers of responses that were received within the focus group discussion. This study was interpretive in nature because I, as the researcher, was responsible for pulling themes from my participants' responses. The key themes I identified included these:

- What grief and loss looked like: confusion about why death happens, sadness and hopelessness, negative coping methods (e.g., addictions, anger, violence, withdrawal).
- The key emotions individuals felt when dealing with situations of grief and loss while supporting grieving individuals included feeling overwhelmed, helpless, awkward, and intimidated.
- Half of the participants felt they had no training in how to deal with grief and loss. The other half felt that their training in counselling skills and their practicums (seminar discussions) prepared them.
- All participants would be interested in more training in caring for someone experiencing grief and loss, such as attending a Grief and Loss Workshop.

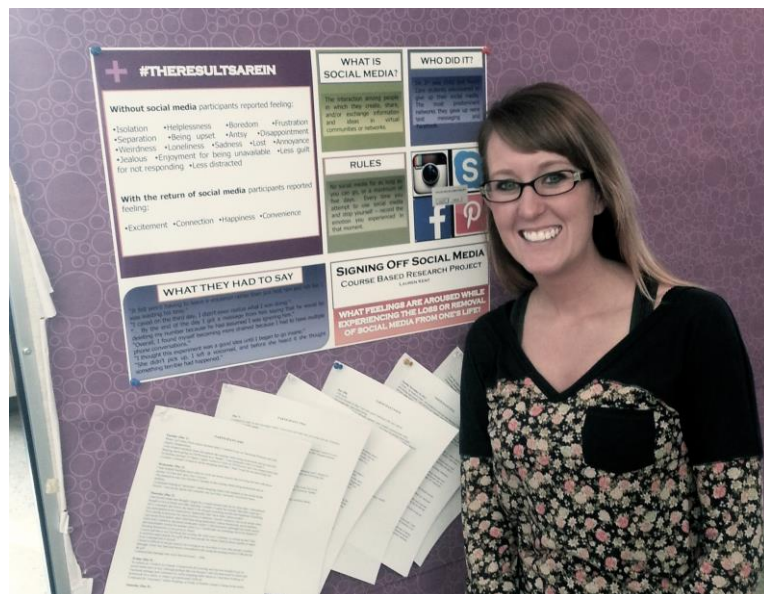
I experienced many interesting opportunities as a result of conducting a creative qualitative research project. The most productive opportunity was that of facilitating a creative drawing exercise in which participants were challenged to express artistically what they experience when they have to support children, youth, and families dealing with grief and loss. As a supporter of the arts, I strongly believe in the power of artistic expression and found that through the participants' symbolic drawings, I gained insight into the four themes at a deeper level. The development of my research poster was another creative element that I appreciated throughout

the assignment; I felt that by designing an eye-catching poster that clearly reflected the themes my research revealed was an excellent way to showcase such an epic learning opportunity. Overall, this research project heightened my understanding of ethical research, research designs, and the processes that dedicated researchers must go through. I am much more intrigued by and interested in participating in further research after participating in such a hands-on encounter with what the practice of research is like.

*Example # 3: Signing Off Social Media
Student Researcher Lauren Kent*

Social media has come into our lives in a very impactful way, and has become a main source of communication that millions of people rely on throughout each day. Today, we are connected in ways that were not imaginable before. These days, even children stay connected in virtual networks and are often more knowledgeable in social media than adults. In the field of Child and Youth Care, we are encouraged to form and strengthen our relationships, and to reach out in any way we can. Maintaining contact, being reliable, and enforcing consistency are staples of practice and must sustained. It is because these practices are so crucial to CYC practice that the thought of giving up social media completely is such a wildly thought-provoking idea.

As a chronic social media user, I was most excited to see what feelings volunteers would experience when they were forced to refrain from using their normal virtual means of communicating. I became excited about incorporating something I have assimilated in my daily life and using it as a resource to further my education. In this process I learned that research design does allow room for creativity and personal expression. Participants in my study reported feelings of disconnection from peers and loved ones, frustration with being



prevented from accessing information that is normally easy to access, and loneliness; they also described feeling helpless, isolated, annoyed, and antsy. When participants were again able to sue social media, they stated that they experienced feelings of excitement, connection, happiness, and convenience. This qualitative research project is one that I will never forget, because I was able to combine personal interest, innovation, and creativity in a research design process that I had previously assumed would be formal and stuffy. As a Child and Youth Care student, I previously associated research with those who study hard sciences: however, I now embrace this creative expression and look forward to the next opportunity to conduct more research of my own.

Example # 4: Practice or Preach? A Study on Harm Reduction
Student researcher: Miriam Kluczny



For the purposes of this research assignment, I chose to explore the topic of harm reduction. This area is of interest to me because it is thoroughly debated within the human services field, especially when it comes to youth who face drug and alcohol related issues. Current literature suggests harm reduction is successful in counteracting the negative effects of substances on youth; there still seems to be, however, a general hesitation about using such practices with this particular population. Thus, the main

goal of my research project was to identify and understand how Child and Youth Care students think about the topic of harm reduction, and what, if anything, keeps them from practicing what they preach. I took a very traditional route when it came to research design: I used focus-group interviews to engage selected participants in identifying and exploring their opinions on the subject in order to establish their own stories and identify barriers to practice.

Given that this was an arts-based research project, I struggled at first with finding a creative way to present my data. The main themes that emerged included the complex nature of a harm reduction approach—specifically, every experience with youth is contextual and necessitates a creative, relational-centred approach. Additionally, barriers to practice were also identified, including personal limitations, social roles, and policy. My exploration established that local CYC students do believe harm reduction—despite its complexity and the obstacles to its adoption—is a valid and sought after approach, and it is only through developing one’s own praxis and permeating the field that these barriers will gradually diminish.

So how was I going to present these findings in a meaningful way? In the same way that I facilitated participants telling their personal stories about harm reduction, I opted to design a poster that both drew in onlookers and allowed them to create their own stories about the subject. My poster depicted a large image of a cigarette with the words “practice or preach” superimposed on it. The controversial yet simplistic nature of this image provoked many questions, prompted conversation, and allowed me as the researcher to communicate my findings. I was very happy with the success of my poster and the discussion it drew. This project taught me that whether one works with youth who abuse substances, with research participants, or with the general public, engaging people in a creative way is the first step toward finding common ground, hearing individuals’ stories, and inciting change.

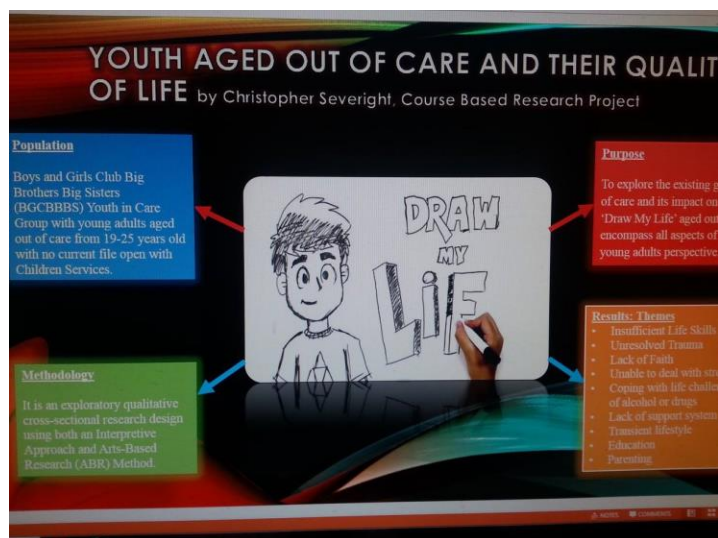
Example 5: Youth Aged Out of Care and Their Quality of Life
Student researcher: Christopher Severight

This course-based study explored the life experiences of youth who transitioned out of government care and how they felt they fared. Utilizing a popular YouTube feature called “Draw My Life,” each research participant was asked to draw his or her life in the context of “Aging Out of Care.” This creative arts-based method of data collection enabled youth participants who did not necessarily have the words to effectively describe what they saw, thought, or felt at the time of transition to express their thoughts and feelings in a holistic manner. The youth identified a range of issues related to having insufficient life skills, dealing with unresolved trauma, lacking faith in their capacity to succeed in life, dealing with high levels of stress, and difficulty coping with life challenges, which resulted in their use of alcohol or drugs.

Student Summary

As students who participated in this research course and conducted our own research-based projects, the value of both active learning and creativity has become very clear. In the Child and Youth Care program—in which so much emphasis had been put on free thought and individual expression—it was not uncommon to hear grumblings about the scientific model of research. As fourth-year students, it was frustrating to confront our first exposure to a procedurally based method when our previous studies focused on the loose structures of relationship building, family dynamics, and the field of mental health. Our general assumptions about generating procedural research produced feelings of uncertainty and felt all too scientific for students previously engrossed in families, children, and youth. Our initial thoughts about the scientific model of research were that it seemed cold or irrelevant to the field in which we are pursuing our passions, one that is known for being grounded on relational-centred planning and practice methods.

However, through an interactive and step-by-step approach to understanding the methodology that underlies research studies, students were able to expand their knowledge base by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Many fourth-year students were pleasantly surprised that the scientific model of research was not all lab-coats and statistics; there was room to be innovative and visionary. Ultimately, students were enticed by the creative opportunities this type of research offered. Some students incorporated artistic methods such as drawing, storytelling, and video to collect their data. Others used cultural philosophies, such as the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel, or the practices of popular culture, such as social media, to underpin their methods and analysis. Finally, all students used eye-catching



visual effects, enticing pictures, and unique design layouts to create informative and attention-grabbing posters to present their data. In the end, this creative approach to inquiry and research methods allowed each of us, as students, to utilize the skills we had developed throughout the course of the program and apply them to research projects that revealed to us how meaningful research can be. Research is not impersonal and calculated; it is enlightening. Research does not have to be conducted only in laboratories; it can be relational and engaging. This opportunity allowed us to showcase our individual creativity and, as such, enabled each of us to internalize real learning we drew from the research process.

In conclusion, as Dr. Bellefeuille discussed at the beginning of this article, exercising a collaborative and creative approach to inquiry is integral to obtaining meaningful data and, subsequently, learning from it. Throughout the Child and Youth Care program, we, as students, have been asked consistently to think outside of the box; in stark contrast to our initial impressions and beliefs about research, this course-based research project gave us the means to do exactly that. As a result of this experience, research no longer induces anxiety; instead, it stimulates thoughts of creativity and innovation. We have learned that in order to understand complex issues, our research needs to be creative—in design, methodology, and overall presentation. If we are interested in expanding our knowledge about people, relationships, and social constructs, we need to be inventive and innovative. The social sciences and humanities are not black and white, so neither should the research done in these fields be black and white. Thus, it is imperative that researchers are unique and passionate about their work, without being limited by traditional beliefs about conducting research. It is only in this way that unique and boundary-pushing information may be established, articulated, and added to our collective knowledge.

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