

# **SIMULATION INNOVATION IN CYBERSPACE: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CHILD AND YOUTH CARE EDUCATION**

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*Leveraging digital technology for practice innovation is a compelling challenge. Limited education and training prevent human service practitioners from incorporating technology into practice. Progress in this area will be achieved when significant changes to pedagogy support technology integration with teaching/learning partnerships in higher education. With the recent attention to relational Child and Youth Care (CYC) practice in cyberspace (Martin & Stuart, 2011), this paper aims to highlight student/teacher explorations in this emerging area of clinical practice using student-driven simulated online counselling sessions supervised by the course instructor. Beyond critical learning within the roleplay activities, students engaged in solving disruptions to simulations, which can enhance their future agility in real practice situations (Rooney, Hopwood, Boud, & Kelly, 2015). Foundations in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), experiential learning theory, and learner-led approaches guided student engagement with technology and reflexive practice in this graduate level classroom.*

**Key words:** Child and Youth Care, digital technology, simulation pedagogy, learner-led approaches, experiential learning, online relational practice

There is currently a dearth of literature discussing innovative andragogical approaches to Child and Youth Care (CYC) practice principles in postsecondary education. Furthermore, literature about technology integration and online relational practice in CYC, a field dedicated to supporting the mental health and well-being of young people who are “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), is absent. Integrating digital technology into postsecondary education for CYC practice settings prepares students to work with young people whose relationships are persistently influenced by technology (Martin & Stuart, 2011). As digital technology integration in mental health remains a largely underrepresented topic in postsecondary literature, innovative educational approaches in this area can be beneficial to teachers and students preparing for unfamiliar territories in emerging online practices. Further, as Martin and Stuart point out, it provides opportunity for students (and teachers) to take risks with technology in the safety of the academic setting. Thus, the aim of this paper is twofold: 1) to highlight the benefits of innovative teaching and learning in higher education classrooms preparing for novel areas of practice and 2) to explore collaborative learning through simulating relational CYC practice in cyberspace- an area that currently has few established ethical or practical guidelines. These aims will be discussed using a thematic analysis of eight graduate students’ papers reflecting theoretical and practical implications for learning and practice in an emerging social service field.

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## **SETTING THE STAGE: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Utilizing postsecondary activities as opportunities for collaborative research inquiries with students (Boyer, 1991; McCarthy, 2008) provides social service fields, such as Child and Youth Care (CYC), with a starting point to explore uncharted challenges and guidelines in new areas of practice. When professors look to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), which involves the elements of discovery, integration, application, and teaching (Boyer, 1991), they create an important juncture to extend research alongside student inquiries for the betterment of practice (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, as cited in McCarthy, 2008). While looking to foundational knowledge from other practice fields, CYC generates theoretical foundations based on its own practice discoveries in relational lifespace work (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2013). Thus, the planning of the course activities reflected in this paper involved bringing together ideas from other social service fields, noted as an important component of SoTL (McCarthy, 2008). The course instructor, in collaboration with a graduate level teaching assistant (both authors of this paper), incorporated elements of experiential learning theory to guide students in transforming their experiences into reliable knowledge acquisition for field work (Kolb, 2015).

This collaborative partnership to learning, involving a former graduate student, a professor, and students from diverse professional backgrounds in youth service settings, allowed for a holistic creation of theoretical and practical groundwork in the emerging area of online relational practice with young people. To further this goal, simulation pedagogy became an excellent foundation for analysis; simulation pedagogy, particularly for health professions, draws on important connections between the learning acquired through navigating unpredictable events together as classmates, and the skills needed for practice in human service fields (Rooney, Hopwood, Boud, & Kelly, 2015). This was complemented with a respect for students as leaders in education through learner-led approaches (Iversen, Pedersen, Krogh, & Jensen, 2015). In this way, skill-building in the classroom paralleled the continued independent skill-building of relational CYC practitioners in the field.

### **Methodology**

This paper examines the experiential use of technology in an online relational practice course with CYC students in a one-year Master's level program offered through a faculty of community services. We realized, in discussion with students during the course, that this unique learning experience would be of interest to other learners and teachers, and that it would make an important contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning. After the course had ended and all marks had been submitted, we sent an email to the students letting them know that we were interested in developing a paper about the simulation activities based on their reflection papers. We asked students who were interested to send their written permission and their reflection papers to the teaching assistant via email. We informed the students that their names would be confidential and that we could not guarantee anonymity because the university and the program would be identified in the paper. We received emailed consent from eight students. Reflection papers from a total of sixteen roleplays (practitioner/youth and practitioner/supervisor simulations) were analyzed in relation to the aforementioned learning theories and CYC practice principles. Using thematic analysis, two themes and six sub-themes emerged. The theme Relational Safety and Paralleling Practice in the Classroom included the

sub-themes: Fidelity, Co-existing Forces of Learning, and Simulation and Real Life Balance. The theme Ethical and Practical Considerations included the sub-themes: Informed Consent and Confidentiality, Boundaries, and Interpretation of Text.

## **THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

### **Relational Safety and Paralleling Practice in the Classroom**

Discussing ethical dilemmas and challenges that arise within simulated roleplay scenarios requires a particular trust between classmates who are assigned as partners. For this reason, it is important that a sense of relational safety is created in the classroom to allow for honest discussions which facilitate genuine, reflective learning. In CYC practice, relational safety refers to the positive outcome produced for young people when the characteristics of CYC practice are carried out effectively (Editorial, 2015). These characteristics include being emotionally present, connecting and engaging, examining context, and reflecting on the co-created space between Self and Other (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). From a SoTL (Boyer, 1991) and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015) perspective, it is interesting how these characteristics of our practice can be paralleled in course work to create a safe learning environment. When classmates take care to be present, connected, engaged, to examine context, and to reflect on their interactions with their classmates, they not only create the safety needed to challenge each other in class, they also practice the skills required for the field.

Both SoTL and experiential learning theory emphasize active, creative scholarship that lends itself to lifelong journeys of learning. Similarly, scholars in simulation-based pedagogy explain that when coexisting learning forces of classroom dynamics and professional practice naturally “hang together”, profound and enduring opportunities for learning occur (Rooney et al., 2015, p. 280). The simulation activities reflected in this analysis prepared students to work with some of the most vulnerable people in society – children and youth with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges who have experienced complex trauma, abuse, and life crises. Creating a safe learning environment to model how CYC practitioners connect to this population with sensitivity, kindness, and respect was paramount (Delay & Martin, 2015). Therefore, trust became an essential component in creating a respectful learning environment to practice these skills. Roleplay activities that paralleled these practice principles, both in simulation and the complexities of real-life dynamics, became incredibly valuable pedagogical tools for this course. To illustrate this, the theme of relational safety and paralleling practice in the classroom is divided into three sub-themes: fidelity, co-existing forces of learning, and simulation and real life balance.

**Fidelity.** In the reflection papers, many students discussed the role play scenarios as if they were happening in real life. In simulation pedagogy, this realistic experience is referred to as *fidelity* (Rooney et al., 2015). In both sets of role-plays, students were encouraged to stay in character even when disruptions to the fidelity of the role plays occurred due to uncomfortable feelings and/or misunderstandings. Rooney et al. explain that these disruptions, much like when actors ‘break the fourth wall’, prepare students to become both “agile learners” and “agile practitioners” as they maneuver through unpredictable events (p. 280). The authors further posit that this non-linear learning process, that balances important occurrences within two domains (the clinical and the classroom), is invaluable when practiced in the safety of a classroom with supervision from the course instructor. With a lack of guidelines and supervision to online therapeutic engagement with young people in CYC practice, unpredictable events are bound to

occur. Thus, the value of safely navigating unpredictable events in unexplored territories is an important learning objective for this field of practice.

The roleplay scenarios, which were conducted to simulate asynchronous email exchanges outside of classroom time, seemed to be of high fidelity. A common example expressed the practitioner's real feelings of relational breakdown: "I experienced many challenges at connecting and engaging with [her]....I failed to respond to her initial email within a short time frame, our relationship didn't recover." The fidelity was so high that one student reflected on how the lack of reply from her young client interfered with her real-life job: "[She] did not reply all weekend, and this amplified my anxiety...made it challenging to be present in the moment with other young people I was working with simultaneously." While the exchanges were taking place, the course instructor made herself available online to provide assurance and guidance when such difficult feelings emerged. Similarly, the teaching assistant, as a former student who had previously engaged in these roleplays, provided peer support in the classroom when students debriefed their experiences. This coordinated support was key to deepen the safe and reflexive learning of students who invested such energy to simulated experiences.

**Coexisting forces of learning.** In such high fidelity simulations, while students are negotiating their comfort levels with their partners, coexisting learning forces are at play: learning that occurs from exploring clinical possibilities in practice and learning that occurs from experiencing each other as students in a university classroom (Rooney et al., 2015). In the reflection papers analyzed here, some students reported feeling safe to challenge their simulation partner, while others reported feeling held back. Important learning about Self and Other occurred in both sets of experiences. In the following example, a student connected the difficulty of accepting critical feedback to the importance of self-reflection in practice: "...my partner brought up in the in-class discussion of [sic] I, as the [CYC Practitioner], ultimately broke the relationship ...This was very difficult to hear; however, self-reflection is such a large aspect of our practice, thus creating room for growth." In another example, a student revealed reflection of Self when choosing *not* to challenge his partner when she offended him during the roleplay: "I did not choose to negatively respond ...despite feeling that way ...much of our later conversation alluded to me being a people-pleaser ...I did not express my true feelings because I felt uncomfortable being perceived as negative and domineering."

In other examples, coexisting forces of learning presented themselves as permeable boundaries between the imaginary roleplay and real experiences of themselves as classmates. That is, it was often difficult to discern whether students were experiencing feelings as the *character* in the roleplay or as a *classmate* being challenged. In the following example, the student expressed frustration with his roleplay partner when she refused to engage (reply to emails) on several occasions: "I found it extremely difficult to be in relationship with [her]...I would argue that both of us were involved in our online relational interaction and therefore both of us were responsible for the direction of it." This student further connected this to practice principles: "...how do we reconcile a young person's lack of responsiveness with our role as a CYC [practitioner] if we're the ones solely responsible for connection?" This anxiety over the direction of the roleplay exemplifies a dual learning process. The student is addressing feelings of frustration as a student who needs to get the assignment done *and* as a student learning clinical practice skills to successfully engage with young people online- a form of connection that differs greatly from the face to face engagement he is accustomed to.

In this next example, the roleplay partners experienced a significant disruption to fidelity. Early on in the roleplay, the supervisee in the simulation admitted she felt her simulation

supervisor did not understand her experiences: "...I felt a sense of anger because [she] continued to tell me ...how I should feel in a situation." Within the scenario, after much strenuous back and forth engagement with her simulation supervisor, she responded to her supervisor's attempt at empathy with this reply: "I really hate how you keep telling me you can hear the pain in my voice. You have no clue what I went through so stop assuming!" After realizing her partner must have misunderstood the assignment instructions, the simulation supervisor reflected: "...most workers would not ordinarily speak to their supervisors in this manner ...I realized that I was feeling frustrated, confused and overwhelmed myself. I needed supervision as well so I reached out and emailed [the instructor]." Both students in this scenario expressed frustrations with each other that represented genuine feelings below the surface of the roleplay. The student playing the supervisee also admitted she misunderstood the assignment. With the support of the course instructor, they restarted the roleplay and were encouraged to stay in role to work out these problems using strategies from the course materials and classroom discussions. This required an immense amount of trust, established at the beginning of the course when the foundations of safety were negotiated by the instructor, the teaching assistant, and the students. When the simulation was completed, they reflected on how they persevered: "...we were rushing for time to ensure that we both had ample amount of time to participate in both roles and write a well written reflection that we both would be proud of." The supervisee in the scenario finally reflected on how they reconciled their differences: "I gained a genuine relationship with the supervisor." This complex process of learning to work out problems, reflect on Self, meet a deadline, and respect each other's feelings in the context of safety and trust, paralleled the skills necessary for professional practice.

**Simulation and real life balance.** In summary, while the courage to challenge each other depended on the relational safety established between roleplay partners, important learning occurred whether fidelity was strictly adhered to or not. As one student reflected: "I found it incredibly challenging to be realistic in my responses in the beginning. I struggled moving myself out of a 'simulation' headspace and into a 'real life' headspace. My responses became more authentic when I became more comfortable ..." The very process of 'moving into a real life headspace' reflects the dedication university students apply to learning and practice. As shown by the examples given, important skill building happens when students begin to explore their experience of Self in relation to their partner, push boundaries, challenge each other, and break the fidelity of roleplay. Rooney and colleagues (2015) argue that strict adherence to fidelity in roleplay scenarios, without a focus on this process, should be reconsidered. Without the 'hanging together' of the clinical and the classroom learning that occurs when safety is co-created and disruptions to fidelity occur, practitioner agility to problem solve within uncharted areas of practice is sacrificed.

### **Ethical and Practical Considerations: Exploring a New Frontier Together**

Currently, there are no ethical guidelines framing how CYC practitioners intervene with young people online. Indeed, there are few regulations to guide online services in general (Harris & Birnbaum, 2015). Although improvements are being made in other fields such as social work, psychotherapy and psychology, the same guidelines are not necessarily a good fit for CYC practice with its unique approach to supporting young people. CYC focuses on using Daily Life Events with distinct characteristics defined for our practice (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). We focus on the lifespace and relational work within that lifespace (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2013). As the course instructor has determined previously, cyberspace is an extension of lifespace for young

people (Martin & Stuart, 2011). In fact, this discovery built the foundation for the course discussed in this paper. However, this discovery marks only the beginning journey of inquiry into this dawning era of practice.

Teaching and learning theories such as SoTL (Boyer, 1991) and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015) emphasize explorative learning through experience. SoTL, in particular, focuses on exploring this learning *alongside* the teacher. Such foundational theories have refreshed teaching and learning to push higher education in new directions such as learner-led approaches in education, which position students as knowledge producers in classrooms (Iversen, Pedersen, Krogh & Jensen, 2015). In tandem with simulation pedagogy (Rooney et al., 2015), learner-led approaches assist students in navigating the unknown and becoming flexible against uncertain conditions. This approach becomes imperative to the practice-based field of CYC, which is in need of guidelines that fit our new frontier of online relational work with young people. Thus, the examples discussed here pose the important question: who better to develop these guidelines than the emerging practitioners themselves? This process of learner-led knowledge mirrors yet another important characteristic of CYC practice- to ‘do with’ not ‘for’ or ‘to’ (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012).

The student authors of these reflections come from different ages and stages of professional practice, which stimulates in-depth exploration of ethical and practical issues from several angles. Some students were self-identified technical luddites, while others were digital natives; some were veteran CYC practitioners, while others were novice. Taking this into account, a collaborative approach facilitated student-led learning (Iversen et al., 2015), which aided the course instructor, teaching assistant, and students to explore potential challenges to CYC practice online. For the purpose of analysis, important ethical and practical discoveries were divided into three sub-themes: informed consent and confidentiality, boundaries, and interpretation of text.

**Informed consent and confidentiality.** Students reflected that obtaining informed consent felt awkward and hindered the relationship with their youth (simulation partner): “I didn’t believe explaining confidentiality to the youth at that moment during the cyber counselling would be appropriate.” In CYC practice, relational connection is paramount to the therapeutic process (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). Therefore, this became a critical point of reflection. Students further considered the advantages of anonymity and disinhibition, but also to the implications of not obtaining identification: “I asked her name and she was reluctant to share...I can only assume that this online space offered her anonymity...” Another student deliberated: “ ‘...verifying a client’s identity becomes most critical’ (Harris & Birnbaum, 2015, p. 135) ...If she had committed suicide, what would have been the legal ramifications for me as the CYC?”

**Boundaries.** Similarly, boundary issues were a common theme, for example: “My failure to establish boundaries ...led to the work ‘creeping in’ to my daily life (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012) as I constantly checked my phone and email to make sure I didn’t miss any messages ...” It is interesting to note that the simulations took place close to the Canadian Thanksgiving holiday, causing students to explore real feelings of homesickness, which further exemplifies the duality of learning processes hanging together. One student reflected: “Mishna et. al. (2012) discuss the concept of permeable boundaries, and how the online world blurs usual boundaries that exist ...knowing she was going to be away from family during Thanksgiving ...I found myself offering services beyond a typical workday.”

**Interpretation of text.** Finally, students remarked on challenges to connect with youth in the absence of facial and non-verbal cues. They tried *emotional bracketing* techniques with some to little success: “Emotional bracketing (Martin & Stuart, 2011; Mishna, Bogo & Sawyer, 2013) was a highly effective technique to ensure that ...my message was articulated despite the lack of non-verbal cues...[big smile and kind eyes], [said with a head nod] and [eye-roll]” Other students reflected this to be ‘cheesy’: “I judged her use of emoting in the brackets like “[groan]” and “[wink]” and similar to the MSW interns in the online counselling study, I found them “‘unnatural’ and ‘cheesy’ (Mishna, Bogo & Sawyer, 2013, pg. 174)”. In a rapidly progressive digital age, young people create unique rituals to compensate for visual facial cues. Deeper exploration into this area became an interesting topic for discussion led by the students.

## CONCLUSION

Such important inquiries, probed in dedicated partnership with students, allows for teachers to be creative in their teaching of new fields of practice (Boyer, 1991). This is critical in the field of CYC as it is not only a practice, it is a way of being with people (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). The roleplays in this course lasted weeks, which is not typical of traditional roleplay modalities in higher education. Thus, the students practiced skills that enhanced their way of being with people and enforced critical skills for practice with young people. Students learned to become good communicators, reflect on Self in relationship to Other, and explore challenges and possibilities of clinical practice. Teaching and learning of this stature is only effective when supervision, discussion, debriefing and care is co-created in a safe and trusting space for students to feel supported in taking risks. As one student noted: “The ease at which we were able to share our reflections mirrored the increased self-disclosure present in online counselling relationships ...Powell (2012) refers to this as *virtual intimacy* (para. 10)”. Feeling safe in a relationship to risk new ways of being is the foundation of CYC work (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). Finding this safety in the online world through simulation pedagogy, experiential learning, learner-led approaches, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning embodies essential elements of both CYC practice and effective higher education. This produces agile, open, and ethical practitioners ready for 21<sup>st</sup> century practice.

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