

Across Border Learning: Extending Relational Practice through Collaborative Poetry

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Abstract

The writers experience a moment of reawakening, a return to the embodied experience of engaging in a collective creative arts-based opportunity to make meaning of a new experience. This reminder, one that occurred during an international study tour, provoked the authors to discuss ways to develop further creative and collective ways of enhancing higher education learning experiences. Our learnings required us to engage in transformational teaching practices with our students and colleagues. While the aim of the international experience for students is to draw their attention to the beliefs, values, culture, histories, and complexities of a context beyond their everyday context, the reflected experience reframed the beliefs and values the author hold regarding teaching cultures and histories. The authors encourage practitioners and educators within Child and Youth Care / Social Care to embark on powerful, effective, creative, and collaborative arts-based programming within their practice as frontline



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ISSN 1605-7406

practitioners and educators. It is through such accessible and intentional *critical relational practices* that Coyle, Pope, and Gulamhusein believe practitioners and educators will connect with those they work with, offer opportunities to make meaning of experiences, overcome inequities in non-collaborative approaches to care, provide spaces to challenge and question social injustices, develop resilience, and empower children and youth to realize their potential in their unique life journey.

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, MacEwan University Child and Youth Care (CYC) students have travelled to the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and, more recently, Scotland. The purpose of these travels is embedded in grappling with the histories, cultures, policies, and practices that impact children, youth, and their families. Such educational travel experiences can be traced to the 17th and 19th centuries when upper-class British men travelled across continental Europe to educate themselves (Ritchie, 2003). Educational tourism has two categories, according to Ritchie (2003). The first is university, college, and school tourism; the second is known as study abroad. The CYC study tour would be a mixture of studying abroad where one focuses on tourism and engages in everyday tourist experiences such as sightseeing and shopping – “tourism first” (Carr & Axelsen, 2005; Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Smith & Jenner, 1997; Stone & Petrick, 2013) and components of a study tour places their educational experience above tourism – “education first” (Stone & Petrick, 2013). The annual international collaboration has led to student exchanges, international practicum opportunities, and students crossing borders for employment and graduate



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ISSN 1605-7406

studies¹. This exchange between MacEwan University (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada) and the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS; Midlands, Midwest Ireland) aims to draw students' attention to the beliefs, values, cultural perceptions, and histories that they work from and within, while developing a broader understanding of the linkages between the aligned fields of Child and Youth Care and Social Care. Prior to travel, students engage in pre-departure course work, exploring Irish and Scottish historical events, values, and beliefs that inform social policies. Pre-work acts as a starting point for critical self-reflection, which continues as they participate in formal and informal experiences throughout the tour. While on tour, students engage in direct and experiential learning, returning with an embodied understanding of how history, culture, religion, and political events intersect and create varying systems of practice when working with children, youth, and families.

¹ While students did not travel during the global pandemic (2021 & 2022), global knowledge mobilization occurred virtually.



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Why Document This Now?

In February 2020, days before the global pandemic brought world travel to an abrupt halt, two faculty members (Gulamhusein and Pope) from MacEwan travelled with twenty-four third-year CYC students for a two-week study tour where the itinerary includes university lectures, assignments, and guided cultural experiences in each country. During one of the “education first” experiences, a colleague at TUS (Coyle) introduced the students to collaborative, collective poetry. Coyle, a lecturer specializing in creative and interactional poetry- and drama-based approaches in social care (an allied field to CYC), leans on her practice with children and young people in residential care to guide her teaching. The foundation of Coyle’s work is centring relationality in practice to provide a potential ‘conduit safe space of trust’ for transformational learning, healing, and change. Coyle embodies social care practice as:

The creative engagement of relationality as a therapeutic working medium used within the life space of an individual or family; to communicate, inspire, guide, support, advocate for, and empower that person or family to realise their potential in their unique life journey. (Coyle & Rea, 2021, 547-556)

This work is unique. Students overcame discomfort, symptoms of burnout and exhaustion, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with one another’s *ways of being* to build a relational alliance through collaborative poetry. The experience allowed for safety of expression and insight into lived experience that may be otherwise difficult to put into words through more traditional pedagogical approaches (Van Burskirk & London, 2008).



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The timing of this article, a few years post experience yet an experience that continues to offer the three of us (Gulamhusein, Coyle, & Pope) opportunities to come together has provoked discussions about how *relational practices* must extend beyond the practitioner-client relationship and into practitioner-practitioner, educator-educator, and educator-student relationships. We unpack the collective poetry experience that brought together students and educators from two different contexts and end by highlighting the power of and practical use of creative artistic collaborations as a way for children, youth, and families to make sense of their experiences while offering them a voice within systemically marginalizing contexts.

Beyond Practitioner-Client Relational Practice

As readers likely know, CYC² is rooted in *relational practice* – a framework founded on the idea that there is an in-between space between the self/practitioner and the other/client (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). As CYC practitioners, one must build connections in this in-between space where two or more people intersect. However, in current relational literature, the intentional language of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), where the complexities of marginalized and minoritized individual and collective lives come together, often in a push-and-pull manner that requires a person(s) to navigate and negotiate a state of being, is left out. Without such intentional language, there is a grave risk of connecting in this ‘in-between space’ without acknowledging the impact of power, privilege, positionality, and other inequities between the practitioner and client. In addition, without an intersectional perspective, the *relational practice* remains confined to a

² For the remainder of the article, we will use CYC to include both Child and Youth Care and Social Care.



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predetermined relational state that does not move beyond exploring relationships between practitioners and clients and into the relational discourse of practitioner-practitioner, educator-student, student-student, and so forth. The disconnect and often limited critical discussion regarding the varying facets of *relational practice*, when explored by an educator-student, student-student, and student-field supervisor, voids learners from the opportunity to engage in transformative learning opportunities (Edward & Cranton, 2012). Multiple identities and roles challenge relational practice that requires the formation of a safe and reciprocally respected space to exchange ideas, beliefs, and build connections (Phelan, 2018).

The tenets of *critical relationality* would have us consider relationships and roles in the realm of education and direct CYC practice as inherently challenging for deconstructive discussion and relational learning. Transforming teaching or practice methodologies requires creative and collaborative approaches that respect the context, knowledge, histories, environments, and values of individual and collective experiences inclusive of the development of *praxis* for students, supervisors, or educators (Olivares & Tucker-Raymond, 2020). *Praxis* is defined as the “ethical synthesis of knowing, being and doing in practice” (Steckley, 2020, p.1), and implicates the design of student learning grounded in expressive, critical, and relational approaches that reduce or address bias or discrimination in the classroom and other learning environments. Olivares and Tucker-Raymond identify the responsibility of ensuring inclusive practices that allow individuals the freedom to challenge and explore learning and experiences in ways that allow for integration or understanding of ideas that facilitate critical relationality. This is where we believe collaborative or collective poetry can play a significant role in the work we do as CYC practitioners, globally.



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Transformative Collective Poetry

MacEwan CYC students were warmly welcomed into Coyle's 'Drama in Social Care' class, where they, Pope, and Gulamhusein, became witnesses to the power of collaborative creative arts-based relational practices. Coyle commenced the workshop by sharing her experience of travelling to Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, the previous year. While attending the Nogojiwanong Reconciliation Gathering, Coyle recognized the similarities in the importance of narratives, storytelling, myths, poetry, and ritual in Irish and Turtle Island Indigenous cultures. Knott (1934) acknowledges that poetry and storytelling are integral to Irish culture. Ireland has preserved a rich oral tradition of poetry as narrative, with evidence of poetry written in the native Gaelic language existing from the 6th century onwards. The history of poetry in Ireland represents the most primitive and original vernacular poetry in Europe (Knott, 1934).

To support students' international experience, Coyle focused on the theme of identity and situated students in the context of the midlands landscape by exploring the mythological story of the Goddess Eriu, sovereign Goddess of Ireland, buried at Uisneach, the sacred centre of Ireland. The story of Goddess Eriu explains how narrative approaches to teaching, such as storytelling, mythology, and poetry, have the potential for therapeutic transformation. Haldane (2010), a poet and neuroscientist, claims that poetry has the capacity to change people in more significant ways than psychotherapy. Being cognizant of the power of poetry as a medium to initiate discussion and engage in a healing journey, Coyle read poetry from community members – youth and adults – and her own. Students were given copies of poems to further discourse around poetic expression. In the last part of the workshop, Coyle invited TUS and MacEwan students to participate in the creation of a collaborative,



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collective poem. The prompt for this poem was to share how you are feeling about your identity in a few words, sentences, or phrases.

For this, and other critical relational, collaborative art-based practices, to enhance one's lived experience, the practitioner, educator, or person in the helping role, often takes on a caretaker role. This role is the conduit of reciprocal trust, the person who holds space and offers continuous support to the participants/students as they negotiate meaning-making through creative mediums (Bustamante Duarte et al., 2019; Scheuerman, Branham, and Hamidi, 2018). Students' ability to freely express themselves was enhanced by maintaining anonymity and the process of weaving words, sentences, and phrases together in a sporadic manner. Spooling the mixed threads of students' feelings into similar themes, connected pieces, or words that *spoke to each other*, Coyle weaved the tapestry of the collective poem back and forth along a frame loom of relational experiences that emerged from being in liminal space together. The finished tapestry became *To Pour for your Empty Heart, To be able to Pour for Another*.



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To Pour for your Empty Heart, To be able to Pour for Another

Winter makes me cold,
Sitting here waiting, I feel cold
Nothing more, nothing less
Tired, weary, confused and lost,
Sitting here waiting for the cold to pass
And calm the anxiety that builds within me
Waiting for those moments to pass
Torn between two worlds battling with myself
While pretending to be fine,
The anguish of knowing what is inside me,
The disappointment of knowing what I can be
Fear of the unknown has made me nervous
Hopefully this time it will be different
What will happen next?

Wondering what it's like to walk around not hiding behind a mask,
Afraid to show my real face
A real face of pain and emotion.
My mask has cracks,
Cracks that I'm always taping up
Everyone thinks those cracks make me broken,
But those cracks make me who I am
Vivid memories flashback in my mind
A frightening dream I had last night about my brother,
Our dreams represent our relationships we have with one another
Freak you, I said,
But please tuck me into bed



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I just wanna be able to sleep, while thinking about mum and dad
Please spare me some,
I am just seven,
I don't know what I am thinking,
I just speak the words I heard,
Love and Belonging
I didn't know it's what I needed,
But is it what I deserve?
Please tell me, I'm just a kid
But they found me
Hiding for one year
Now living a peaceful life
Being happy, free, in control, they found me
My Angel called the Child Protective Services

At last the wings are up,
My feet have flown off the ground
The sounds around have filled my cup,
I was Ireland bound
So excited to set sail on a new adventure
Far away from my Canadian home,
I'm so happy to be in the Emerald Isle
For the first time on my own
So many new experiences with numerous thoughts and feelings
The things we see and the things we do have an impact on me and you
When we start to learn
We start to yearn for more knowledge and adventures
To my left I see green,
To my right I see green



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There is a lot of green, oh there's a sheep
One thing is for sure I don't see a lot of people like me
But I will enjoy this trip no matter what happens
Because grades are just grades but this experience is a life lesson

I wish I bought a scarf
I wish I bought a hat
Maybe next time I listen to Christine
And quit being such a brat
Food is the mood, Turkey, bacon and eggs
Breakfast for dinner, Breakfast in bed
Chomp, Chomp, Chomp
I hear from across the room at night
I do not fear because my pal is near
Chomp, Chomp, Chomp
I see eyes in the dark
Big and beady staring back at me,
Chomp, Chomp, Chomp
I feel a trickle down my leg
Too much apple juice, right before bed

Homework stresses me out
I lose sleep because I don't know what to write about
Jetlag has been drag, I still feel the lag,
I don't want to brag, but I feel that I'm still a stag
Disorientated, fuzzy, and lack of sleep
My eyes are heavy, my tummy is turning
Buts it's all good though, in a brave new world
Everyone dreams to be someone, someday



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I dream of success, most of us would say
Everyone dreams to achieve something in life
I dream because success starts with dreaming
Strong at the heart in my happy place, Learning is my blessing today
I'm used to being alone
I do everything alone
Eat alone, sleep alone
Shop alone, work alone
Now I'm surrounded by a sea of people
And the presence crashes into me like an uncontrollable tidal wave
Different sites and similar sceneries
But somehow all the same feelings
It's hard to believe such troubling things happened in such a glorious place
History hangs a question mark as I look out the window
And see unreal greens and I hear a beautiful way of talking,
Ireland, I wonder how the land managed to grow over the horrors of the past,
I suppose the land is growing over the sins of my country's past too

Loving the cold and can't wait for more
Clouds are above my head as the cold air hugs my skin
It's a fresh start for a new year, new date, new life to begin
The beautiful image of cold snow that warms my soul
Take a deep breath, process what you're feeling,
Know that you're not alone
Tomorrow is another day
My friends around me,
Humble, I feel, I smile, I love
To live is to love
To pour for your empty heart



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To be able to pour for another
We carry a puzzle piece passed down to us
It fills us whole
In good relation
We complete each other's jigsaw

**Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) & MacEwan University
Students, 2020**

Translating Lessons to CYC and Social Care Practice

As we sat, merely an hour after students formulated their words and sentences, we listened to Coyle recite the collective poem. Pope and Gulamhusein looked at each other with the same sense of awe that we had when we first sat in Coyle's class. While we theoretically knew the power of arts-based practices, Pope and Gulamhusein's experience of sitting in an unfamiliar learning space, momentarily realizing their responsibilities as educators and taking up space as learners, the privilege of transformative learning opportunities shook them. Transformative learning involves individual change, social change, and accounts for autonomous or relational learning that can exist in a dualistic manner or through coexistence (Edward & Cranton, 2012). Moving beyond traditional educational practices to include experiential learning events establishes a bridge or crosses a *threshold* between previous awareness or consciousness to a new understanding that shapes future practice and connections (Steckley, 2020). Threshold concept theory exposes that identity or *praxis* development involves the process of both educator and student grasping or wrestling with new ideas or experiences that impact perspective or what was previously understood.



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Pope and Gulamhusein watched students laugh, frown, question phrases of the poem, and glance around the room as they heard their peers and their own lines recited out loud. Joy filled the room, just as the voices of students filled it, and once again we were reminded of the power of narratives, the purpose of intentional *critical relational practices* that honour the complexities of sharing space with others, all of which led to voices being heard in creative and collaborative ways.

Most importantly, it reminded us (Pope and Gulamhusein) that as practitioners and educators, it is our responsibility to poke holes through the pre-formed boxed approach to working with children, youth, families, and communities to allow space for new and creative forms of self-expression. Ungar (2004), in a similar fashion, reminds readers of the many youth workers and others within systems of care who “appreciate that we need to better hear the voices of youth if we are to understand their experiences of problems and identify solutions that fit their constructions of reality” (197-198). While Pope and Gulamhusein’s travels and engagement with students does not directly reflect youth work systems that focus on *troubled youth*, it was through words in the collective poem that we were reminded that each student comes with an unspoken narrative. When given the safe, trusting, anonymous, and caring opportunity to express themselves, voices of struggle, joy, excitement, content, and fear were presented. For instance:



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*Wondering what it's like to walk around not hiding behind a mask,
Afraid to show my real face
A real face of pain and emotion.
My mask has cracks,
Cracks that I'm always taping up
Everyone thinks those cracks make me broken,
But those cracks make me who I am*

Reading the above, it becomes apparent that collective poetry, an approach to sharing that does not directly identify an individual, offers people the opportunity to become wilful subjects (Ahmed, 2014). Through this wilfulness, a chance to anonymously express oneself, people begin to make sense of their experiences. For example, we learn of a person hiding behind a mask to ensure the world sees them in a particular way. The perception of others is likely a simplified version of the complex self. The masking of one's authentic self is only sustainable for a degree of time before the *cracks* become visible to others. In the end, this student creates space in their writing to make meaning of their cracks and to reclaim and reframe these cracks as their way of being. Another student(s)³ notes:

*I'm used to being alone
I do everything alone
Eat alone, sleep alone
Shop alone, work alone
Now I'm surrounded by a sea of people*

³ Due to the nature of the collective poetry writing process, it is not possible to know if one or multiple students wrote these lines.

In this student(s) voice, Subramaniam's (2013) description of the need to understand material objects such as our bodies as co-productions of nature and culture comes to mind. Here, as this student shifts from a state of feeling and being alone to being in a community and a different cultural context, their understandings of historical, economic, cultural, and personal knowledge are transformed into socially embedded manners (Subramaniam, 2013). Additionally, Subramaniam reminds us that through such experiences, our DNA is also altered. Through this DNA alteration, experiences are passed down through generations – one might think about intergenerational trauma here – but one may also think of this as positive intergenerational change. By offering opportunities to engage in such collective practices, to witness one's words within the words of others, the socially embedded methods of knowing, being, and doing (White, 2007) are brought to the forefront to enhance the meaning-making process.

Another example of students performing their experience comes from the following:

*Winter makes me cold,
Sitting here waiting, I feel cold
Nothing more, nothing less
Tired, weary, confused and lost,
Sitting here waiting for the cold to pass
And calm the anxiety that builds within me
Waiting for those moments to pass
Torn between two worlds battling with myself
While pretending to be fine,
The anguish of knowing what is inside me*



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ISSN 1605-7406

From these student(s) voices, it becomes clear that their experience(s), still only days old at the time of writing this poem, has become embodied. Collectively, they found a way to articulate the sensations within their “living, sentient, purposive [bodies] – as the indispensable medium for all perception,” or somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2012, p.3). As a collective sharing in and practicing within *critical relational theories*, students were allowed to move past the disconnect between emotions and the physical body that is often experienced during trauma (van der Kolk, 2014). Here, when we speak to trauma, a broad understanding acknowledges the tensions of living in shifting spaces that require constant reflection and navigation to make sense of why something has occurred, including the disruption travel may cause in emotional and physical states of being. Through the collective poetry experience, students were gifted an opportunity to move into a space beyond the trauma.

We further see how providing liminal space to negotiate meaning-making in the last verse of the collective poem. Here, students' anxieties and traumatic life experiences that they carry with them are expressed and counterbalanced by student(s) self-identified strategies for living, such as deep breathing, processing feelings, and being surrounded by love, kindness, and positive relationships. Student(s) share:

Take a deep breath, process what you're feeling,
Know that you're not alone
Tomorrow is another day
My friends around me,
Humble, I feel, I smile, I love
To live is to love
To pour for your empty heart
To be able to pour for another



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ISSN 1605-7406

We carry a puzzle piece passed down to us
It fills us whole
In good relation
We complete each other's jigsaw

Unpacking trauma is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is critical to recognize that this collective piece offered an opportunity for students to process traumatic events that occurred before the age of 18 – adverse childhood experiences (Sweeney et al., 2018) and how engaging in a trauma-informed approach to practice supports the brain's ability to counteract said trauma (Teicher et al., 2022; Treisman, 2018, 2021; Twardosz & Lutzker, 2010; van de Kolk, 2014). Most crucially, through creative arts-based practices, CYC and Social Care practitioners can sit in the in-between space (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2008; Fewster, 2005; Garfat, Freeman, Gharabaghi & Fulcher, 2018; Gulamhusein, 2021a, 2021b) to meet service users (students, children, youth, and families) with increased intentionality and authentically relational.

Making Meaning of Creative Approaches

Meaning-making as a characteristic of CYC relational practice describes the manner in which a person attempts to make sense of their experiences (Steckley, 2020). Meaning-making is a process of interpretation or grappling with understanding that is personal to each person in any interaction or shared experience. Collaborative processes such as the one described above situate participants in the relational space with themselves, other participants, the facilitator, and the synergy of the group as a whole. Sharing as part of a collective process is conducive to accessing one's own inner world and one's imagination. Here, one's beliefs,



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ISSN 1605-7406

values, culture, perceptions, and histories that one works from and within are expressed in purposeful ways. Additionally, the collective approach offers a contextual multi-relative space to reflect on one's own and others' lived experiences; in turn, one is able to negotiate and make sense of their own lived experiences. By offering innovative ways of working with students, service users, colleagues, and peers, we create opportunities to reveal what may not be implicitly understood. Such creative approaches to care can provide critical, intersectional, post-structural, socially active, and complex ways of understanding ourselves and the children, youth, families and communities we work alongside each day.

Ultimately, the writers are reminded of how the coming together of Canadian and Irish students in a particular space fostered by collective poetry mirrored what research has evidenced about working through collective participatory arts-based practices. Using collaborative, participatory, creative arts-based (i.e., narrative, visual, or somatic) projects in academia, CYC and Social Care venues, or in the community, practitioners/scholars and those we work with co-construct a contextual space that is safe, liminal, and reciprocal. Such spaces honour shared voices and explore social constructs of self-esteem, self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-confidence. Virtues of building resilience, unpacking social issues such as structural inequalities, social policies, and human rights occur, national cultural identity and a sense of belonging are strengthened and promoted, and an opportunity is provided to negotiate further shifting beliefs, values, healing, and growth.

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April 2025

ISSN 1605-7406

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