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21st Century Child and Youth Care Education: An Ontological Relational Turn in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The pedagogical challenges in preparing child and youth care (CYC) education for 21st century CYC practice, global citizenship and life cannot be rightfully addressed by an antiquated higher education system predicated on a Newtonian/Cartesian ontology that assumes a mechanistic view of the materialistic world and a solitary view of the "self" as completely autonomous, ego-based, and self-enclosed. In this article, we propose an alternative ontological stance for teaching and learning in higher education, one that is informed by the growing body of relational ontology scholarship in theology, philosophy, psychology, nursing, political theory, educational theory, and even information science. The basic contention of a relational ontology is that all relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves. Within this perspective, the "self" is not so much a personal possession as it is a process of relatedness and a reflection of one's relational experiences. This view of the self has enormous implications for teaching and learning. A relational ontological approach to education will employ more holistic, collaborative, and experiential methods of teaching and learning in which the learner's (i.e., the self's) mind, body, emotions, spirit, and environment are all considered essential components of the learning process. The conversation presented in this article is an invitation to rethink the ontological foundations upon which CYC education is currently constructed and to explore the potential of an ontological revolution in CYC teaching and learning pedagogy. In CYC, as in other disciplines, it is the visionaries operating at the edges of the discipline's philosophical, theoretical, and practice boundaries who provide the critical reflection and creativity of thought to nudge the field forward. The educationists are suggested to join this adventure.
Keywords: Cartesian; Education; Learning; Ontology; Relational; Teaching.

1. Introduction

1.1. "Education is not the Filling of a Pail but the Lighting of a Fire." – William Butler Yeats

Having just crossed the threshold of the 21st century, it is indisputable that the world today is radically different than it was when we, the authors, began our professional careers some four decades ago. Although humans are not yet hovering off to work with our own personal jetpacks, the shift towards global interconnectedness and the explosion of technological advances have brought about profound and far-reaching changes that have virtually reshaped every aspect of our daily lives. We now live in communities that are radically more diverse, much less certain or predictable, and considerably more complex. It is in this world, that packs more into each day and is changing more rapidly than at any time in human experience, that child and youth care (CYC) education programs aim to prepare their students to practice their profession. We now live in a globalized, technological, and diverse world order that has and continues to revolutionize how we communicate, work, engage in interpersonal relationships, rear families, and perceive the world in general while we seek meaning in life (Parry and Bellefeuille, 2015). In our opinion, the pedagogical challenges in preparing CYC students for 21st century CYC practice, global citizenship, and life in general cannot be properly addressed by an antiquated higher education system that is predicated on a Newtonian/Cartesian ontology, which assumes a mechanistic view of the materialistic world and a solitary view of the "self" as completely autonomous, ego-based, and self-enclosed. In this article, we propose an alternative ontological stance for teaching and learning in higher education, one that is informed by the growing body of relational ontology scholarship in theology, philosophy, psychology, nursing, political theory, educational theory, and even information science. The basic contention of a relational ontology is that all relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves. Within this perspective, the "self" is not so much a personal possession as it is a process of relatedness and a reflection of one's relational experiences. This view of the self has enormous implications for teaching and learning. A relational ontological approach to education

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2. Rethinking the Ontological Foundations of CYC Education

While there are many explanations of what ontology is, for the purposes of this discussion, ontology is defined as the fundamental, taken-for-granted assumptions about the ultimate reality of things and, particularly for CYC students, how the nature of "self" (i.e., what it is to be a human being) is understood (Bellefeuille and Ricks, 2010). In general, CYC curriculum development is rooted in ontological individualism that is predicated on a Cartesian view of a solitary, autonomous, and unitary "self" and that considers thought to be the product of an individual, rational process (Lange, 2004;2012a;2012b). As Descartes (1993) concludes in The Meditations:

> …there is a great difference between mind and body, inasmuch as body is by nature always divisible, and the mind is entirely indivisible. For, as a matter of fact, when I consider the mind, that is to say, myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet if a foot, or an arm, or some other part, is separated from my body, I am aware that nothing has been taken away from my mind (p. 97).

From this work arose Descartes's famous maxim "I think, therefore I am", which served to promote the deep-seated Western tendency to see the mind and body as distinct, with the mind elevated to a higher status than the body. Descartes's claim that the mind and body are ontologically separate entities, known to this day as Cartesian Dualism, helped to set the groundwork for our current disembodied approaches to teaching and learning, which assume the individual "self" is the focus of schooling and the locus of knowledge. Hence, the objective of our current model of education is to develop the individual knower, and the aim of teaching is to expand the individual's knowledge and skills because the underlying assumption is that knowledge is decontextualized and relatively stable (Gergen, 2009). From this ontological stance, knowledge is framed as an authoritative body of facts that lie outside the learner's experience; consequently, the focus is on teaching, not learning, what Paulo Freire (1973) calls the "banking" concept of transmission-based education. As Freire and many others have argued, the goal of educational pedagogies that entail one-way transmission of knowledge from educator to student *based on methods of rote learning and memorization* and use conventional testing methods (e.g., multiple-choice exams, quizzes, academic papers) is to produce high-performing, autonomous, and rational individuals. The successful student is the one who can correctly identify what is important and communicate it back to the instructor.

The extent to which CYC education has absorbed a Cartesian approach to learning in CYC education and how this approach has predisposed CYC education to be concerned principally with the mastery of educating the mind is incongruent with much contemporary thinking on the nature of 21st century teaching and learning. How often have we as CYC educators watched students walk around like zombies, feeling emotionally stressed out because of the disembodied process within which they are taught? This disengagement is a direct result of an education model founded upon ontological individualism, which takes little account of the characteristics of individual learners or the distinct prior knowledge and motivation that each person brings to the learning encounter. This form of education transforms learners into empty containers to be filled by educators, resulting in the dehumanization of both the students and the teachers.

2.1. It is Time to Close the Factory

As Lillard (2005), explains, the consequence of transition-based pedagogies has been over a hundred years of a factory production model of education in which learning is approached as a straightforward process of response to stimuli. While this approach might never have been the most effective way to bring about deep learning, its value and efficacy are even more dubious in today's postmodern culture. Sir Ken Robinson (2006) and others have similarly pointed out that the global economy is calling for a shift from knowledge to creativity (Peters *et al.*, 2009; Sheridan-Rabideau, 2010). In his TED Talk, "Schools kill creativity", which has been viewed over 45 million times across the world, Robinson (2006) embraces an embodied and relational understanding of learning in which he insists that creativity in the 21st century is crucial and that students will have to become passionate and collaborative learners—traits the current system of higher education was not designed to promote. Netzer and Mangano Rowe (2010) , describe creative learning as learning that embraces "both rational and intuitive epistemologies" (p. 141) that "[open] learners to multiple ways of knowing [by] developing [learners] experientially [thereby] increasing the capacity for reflective awareness of self in relationships to a larger scope of being in the world" (p. 125). Einstein himself declared that "Imagination is more important than knowledge," and, given his stated rejection of the traditional education he was offered, we wonder how Einstein would have fared in the university classes of today's system of higher education.

3. Relational Ontology

Relational ontology rejects the Cartesian view of human beings as autonomous, ego-based individuals. From a relational ontological perspective, it is in "our being-with others as a singular existence within a plurality of unfolding relationships...[that] we meaningfully exist" (Nancy, 1991). It is important to understand that relational ontology does not deny the place of the individual; rather, it illuminates the significance of relationships by shifting the centre of gravity from the individual psyche to its relational matrix (Churchill, 2011). In his 2009 book *Relational being: Beyond self and community*, Gergen (2009) argues that ontologically "all we take to be real, rational, and good emerges not from individual minds but from relational process" (p. 281). He goes on to explain that "It is not individuals who come together to form relationships; rather, it is out of collaborative action (or co-action) that the very conception of the individual mind comes into existence (or not)" (p. 281). Drawing on relational ontology's challenge to the dominant view of isolated minds, Gergen (2009) stresses the fundamental importance of our relationships in education, and he rejects the Cartesian ontological conception of the autonomous and rational "bounded being" independent of others. Gergen (2009), suggests that individuals ontologically exist in relational processes and that what we call the self is, in fact, an aspect of relationships. "It is not individual minds who come together to form relationships; it is out of relationship that individual functioning emerges" (p. 298). He promotes a model of relationally embodied action in which:

> …all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone (Gergen, 2009).

3.1. The Whole Me: Embodied Ways of Knowing

From a relational ontological perspective, all meaning emerges from co-action. In other words, human beings create meaning in collaboration, and relationships are processes that individuals cannot be separated from. Therefore, embracing a relational ontological approach to teaching and learning shifts the primary intention and attention of CYC education from *knowing* to *being* and from what should be learned to the learning process of students. Whereas traditional conceptualizations of curriculum in CYC education is generally applied across four dimensions: (a) aims and objectives, (b) content and subject matter, (c) methods and procedures, and (d) evaluation and assessment, a relational ontological conceptualization of curriculum would seek to expand the way we look at curriculum by emphasizing the totality of the learning process in which the student's mind, body, emotions, and spirit are jointly considered as components of the learning process. Instead of regarding knowledge as information that can be stockpiled within a (disembodied) mind, learning within a relational ontological perspective is understood as the development of embodied ways of knowing or being. The idea of learning through the total being shifts the emphasis from a linear approach based on predetermined expectations (e.g., student achievement) to a holistic view of teaching and learning that focuses on the broadest development of the entire individual by focusing on the relationship between the head, heart, and soul, as well as the interconnectedness of knowledge, theory, and practise.

3.2. The Relationship Between Relational Ontology and Critical Pedagogy

A relational ontological approach to teaching and learning encourages a deep, inter-personal, reflective journey in which knowing, doing, and being are deeply interconnected, inseparable aspects of the same process. Thus, relational ontology gives rise to critical pedagogy of classroom practices in which the classroom setting with all its structural limitations can become a site of collaborative agency where instructors and students become co-learners (Giroux, 2013). Such an approach to CYC education can provide a learning context that is more generative than the context enabled by pedagogies that depend on methods of rote learning and memorization and generally entail a one-way transmission of knowledge from educator to student.

3.3. The Relationship between Relational Ontology and Arts-Based Methods

The strength of education achieved through the creative use of arts-based methods is grounded in the belief that creativity is central to human learning because a creative learner is able to engage in alternative ways of knowing that include "the spirit, mind, body, and emotional components of learning" (Merriam *et al.*, 2007). Recent literature on the neuroscience of creativity (Bereczki and Kárpáti, 2018; Brien, 2011; Buffington and McKay, 2013; Cozolino, 2013;2014; Eisinger, 2011; Hardiman *et al.*, 2019; Marshall, 2014; Siegel, 2012) tells us that the mind is inherently social and learns within relationships and that physical sensation and emotion are essential components of the mind—as integral to thought and learning as logic is (Damasio, 2003; Levitin, 2006; Parsons, 2005; Peterson, 1993; Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1999). As Bellefeuille *et al.* (2014), explain, arts-based teaching and learning is more than simply conveying ontological "truths" through the transmission, retention, and reproduction of knowledge via established scientific evidence. Rather, it includes an aesthetic and ethical dimension that embodies Plato's characterization of the three realms of the good, the true, and the beautiful, which values the process of discovery as much as the unearthing itself. Dirkx (2001) and Lawrence (2005) similarly argue that arts-based teaching and learning methods create additional "intellectual space" that revitalize students' level of somatic awareness, thus resulting in richer and deeper learning experiences by bringing to consciousness the spiritual, emotional, and mythological aspects of the self. Likewise, Brown (2015) calls attention to the catalytic role of the arts in broadening one's understanding of the world as they help to uncover hidden knowledge that cannot easily be expressed in

words. Finally, Bellefeuille *et al.* (2012) believe that the complexity and diversity of modern-day life can be illuminated and communicated more freely through the arts because the latter provide the opportunity for varied constructions of meaning, thus allowing students to break out of established cultural dominant patterns of framing the world. Below, we provide some examples of more purposeful teaching and learning practices that act on the theoretical underpinnings of relational ontology.

3.3.1. Example # 1: CYC Practice Self-Portrait Arts-Based Assignment

As part of a third-year advanced CYC practice methods course that has as its focus the integration of theory, self, and ethical practice, students are required to construct an arts-based CYC practice self-portrait as their final assignment. By tapping into the affective domain of learning, the purpose of this arts-based assignment is to stimulate students' imagination and creative capacities in their efforts to communicate and critically explore what is meaningful to them in describing their emerging CYC identities. The assignment does not require any artistic training because the goal of arts-based learning methods is not to teach CYC students to be artists but, rather, to create immersive learning experiences that make use of artistic processes to help them gain new insights and perspectives about their learning experiences. In contrast to the more traditional teaching (i.e., lecturing) and conventional testing methods (e.g., multiple-choice exams, quizzes, and academic papers), the arts engage all senses, thus provoking strong affective responses that can provide a catalyst to encourage students to explore and express themselves in multiple and divergent ways beyond the traditional cognitive ways of knowing.

Students begin by selecting from a variety of arts-based materials (i.e., paper-mache, clay, cloth, wood, and bottles) to create a figurative self-image (see Figure 1).

Figure-1. Figurative self-image
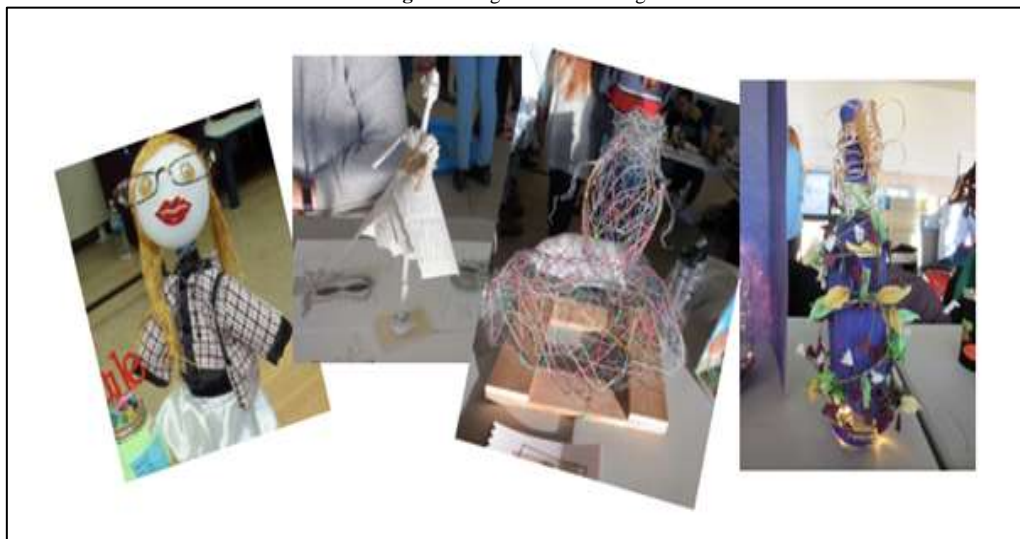
Following the creation of their figurative self-image, students are required to construct a series of backdrop scenes using symbolic imagery to communicate their learning and understanding of the course material. The images are electronically copied and pasted into a Word document and accompanied by a brief explanation (see Figure 2). Through creative expression and digital storytelling, students often move beyond their everyday academic experience to reveal poetic and imaginative renderings inspired by the inner voices of their deepest selves. Through this creative process, they escape the habit of framing themselves and the world in accustomed ways. For many, the project is transformative in nature and enables them to overcome shyness, increase self-esteem and self-confidence, and share their new awareness with their community.

Figure-2. Background scenes

The course is structured around six specific content modules. Students are required to design a minimum of one backdrop scene per module. Together, these scenes create a colorful visual narrative in the form of a storybook. (see Figure 3).

Figure-3. Storybook covers
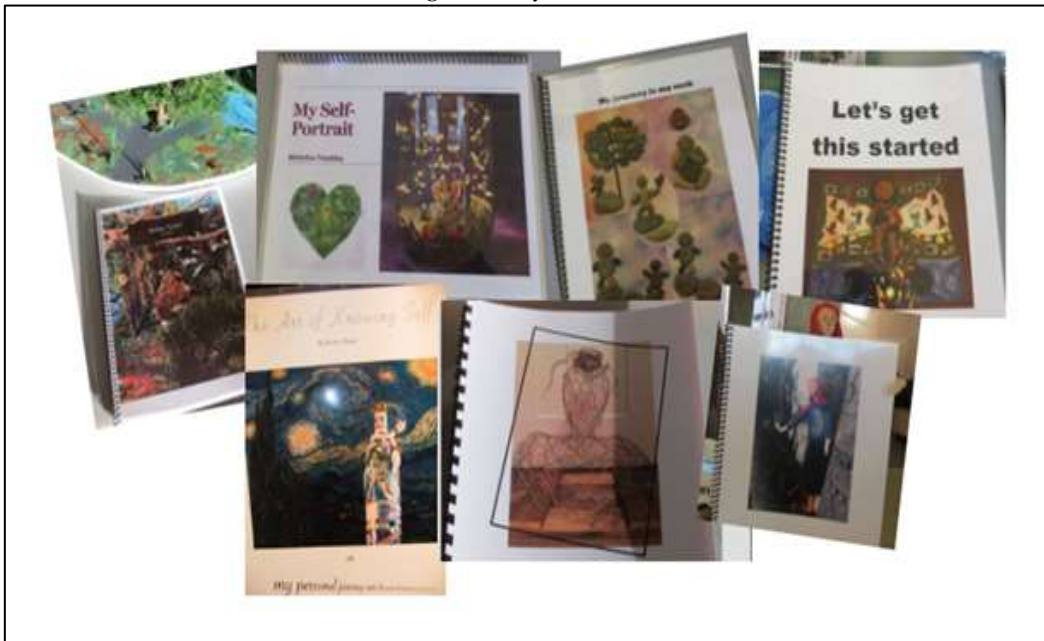
At the end of the course, the storybooks are displayed in a public showcase event attended by students, faculty, and public stakeholders (see Figure 4). The power of expressive arts not only inspires students to explore new ways of expressing their learning, but it can also promote higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem as well as communication and interpersonal skills.

Figure-4. Public showcase

CYC practice self-portrait arts-based assignment offered students a new creative space to examine their course learning in ways traditional learning assessments does not afford. Students in this class mastered course content in manner they had not done previously experienced. The power of the connection between critical reflection and creativity became explicit through the diversity of expression and multiple ways of knowing that were made known as students showcased their work.

3.3.2. Example # 2: Creative Journaling Assignment

The second example describes a second-year arts-based creative journaling assignment in which CYC students are asked to express, through the use of the arts as a methodology for learning what they have learned about the therapeutic practice of expressive therapies (see Figure 5). The creative journaling assignment provides an imaginative, holistic, fluid, and emotionally stimulating learning context in which students become more personally engaged in the learning process. The assignment goes beyond the process of completing assignments as something for students to get through without understanding their relevance to their lives: it helps frame students' learning experiences by connecting the cognitive with the emotive; it encourages students to critically self-examine their assumptions; and it increases understanding by creating a space for experimentation where alternative views can be explored.

Figure-5. Creative journaling assignment

The creative journaling process makes learning come alive because journaling is not based on a priori knowledge—that is, knowledge that is gained without having to appeal to experience; journaling transforms learning into a creative relationship. As students explore their learning through the creative journaling process, they begin to understand "knowing" as a process rather than a product or an object. The process can help students see the many

different ways a subject can be explored and understood; this, in turn, can open up the learning process by offering alternative views that can challenge fixed disciplinary lenses. Students' emotional reactions to the journaling process itself can also lead to interesting insights into the inquiring self.

Many of the journal entries illustrate the new ways students perceive and interpret the world, and they reflect critical new insights in the personal realm, which in turn creates greater understanding of issues of social justice. As students are pushed to see the world from diverse perspectives, they often experience profound shifts in values and heightened sensitivity to the experiences of others concerning factors such as poverty, prejudice, stereotyping, violence, and gender. When students reflect critically on these elements, many of the assumptions they have taken for granted throughout their lives are challenged and modified.

Students present their journals at the end of the course, which provides an excellent opportunity for additional learning (see Figure 6). Showcasing their creative journals brought to life students' diverse perspectives and assumptions on the course material serving to further their engagement in the complexity and the emergence of the learning process in a manner that was challenging and meaningful for them.

Figure-6. Presentations

3.3.3. Example # 3: Social Justice Assignment

In a third-year course examining issues of social justice, students are immediately asked the questions, "what is it that makes you mad?" or put another way "what is it that you love?". Unsuspectingly, their response to these questions will determine the learning context in which they will explore issues of social justice, inequity, and difference. As stated earlier, the relational ontology of learning environments envisions education as a set of processes that engages the whole person, and it is intended to enhance relationships rather than a product consisting of a predetermined curriculum and learning assessments. Students are therefore provided with the opportunity not only to choose what social justice issue to investigate but to identify their own learning needs and the method in which they will choose to explore their topic of choice. Their interest in a particular social justice issue often relates to their personal histories, which increases their level of emotional investment. As a result, students are much more passionate and engaged in the learning process. This method of teaching and learning supported students to develop more complex understandings of their course learning by encouraging reflection from multiple socio[political-historical-cultural perspectives and frames of knowing. Through their creative projects, students engaged in critical reflections not only from their intellectual knowledge but also from a range of subjective forms of knowing (e.g., affective, somatic, intuitive, social, cultural and/or spiritual). This more holistic learning process prompted new insights, questions, connections, and which expanded, reframed and in a good way complicated their learning experience. Some examples of the projects produced by students in this class are described below.

3.3.3.1. Life: The Social Injustice Edition Modeled on the Conventional "Game of Life."

One student project introduced a social justice iteration of the game of life (see Figure 7). In this modified version, the participants randomly select an identity (such as an Indigenous identity, White identity or Black identity). Every identity has a specific pathway confounded by obstacles that are encountered in real life. By playing this game, participants gain a heightened level of social awareness concerning issues of marginalization, systemic racism, inequity, and privilege.

Figure-7. Modified game of life (social justice version)
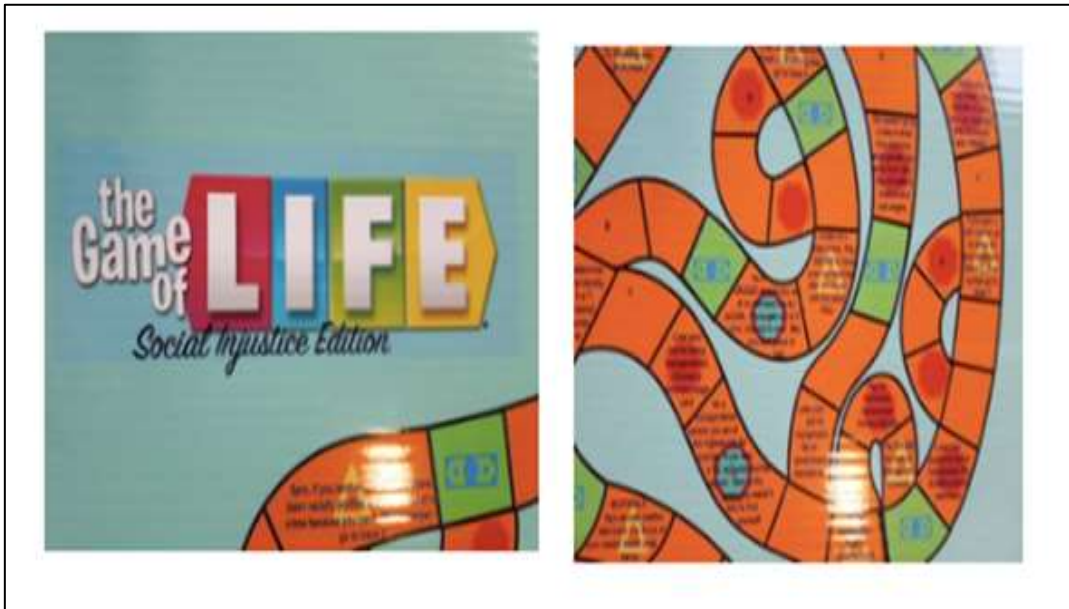
3.3.3.2. A Trajectory of Mental Health Treatment Shown Through an Interactive Arts-Based Display

This interactive arts-based display (see Figure 8) was created by a two students interested in the issue of mental health injustice. The display consisted of a series of voice recordings describing the experiences of individuals suffering from mental health issues across a historical timeline. The experiences ranged from archaic methods of torture, confinement, and various denigrating labels to the changing public attitudes about mental health.

Figure-8. Mental Health Interactive Arts-Based Display
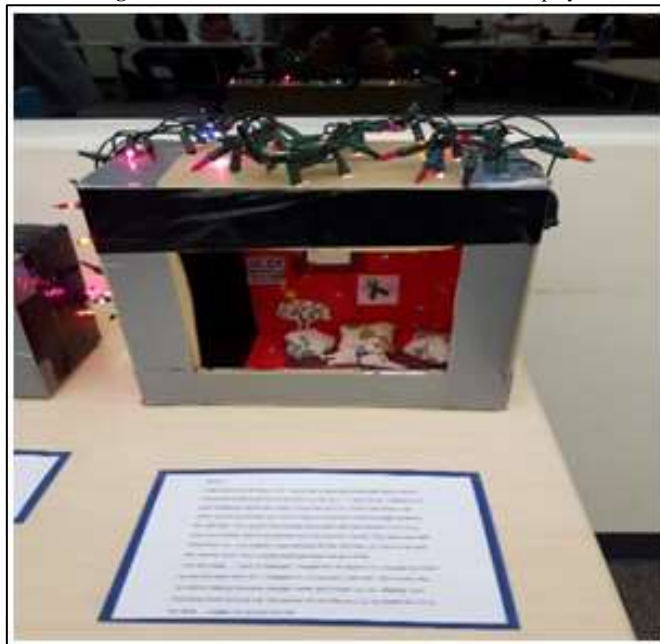
3.3.3.3. From Somalia to Canada: Representation of the Intersections of Being a Black, Muslim Woman

A plexiglass artistic image (as can be seen in Figure 9) was designed by a student of color to symbolize the intersecting complexities of identity from her personal lived-experiences of social inequity, marginalization, racial prejudices, and stereotypes. The obscurity of the images, which is a result of the layering glass with multiple images and discourses perpetuated about Muslim women within North American socio-political environments, is intentional to demonstrate the concept of intersectionality.

Figure-9. Plexiglass artistic image of intersectionality

Other topics of investigation included the unsolved cases of Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women that involved the presentation of flowers, tobacco, sage, and photographs of the missing and murdered women and girls set in a crafted coffin. The student provided an informative and eloquent narrative using statistics and poetry to bring to life the story of each girl and woman highlighted in the installation. Another student used a digital storytelling method to share the experience of being queer. The narrative was powerful, honest, vulnerable, and provided an invaluable education for the entire class. A final example involved a video documentary on the "unhoused" in Edmonton's city center that was crafted by a team of four students. The documentary was explicit in capturing the students' experiences, such as the awkwardness that they felt in approaching and inviting homeless individuals to join them in conversation.

In reflecting on this assignment, it is important to start from where students are, both individually and collectively and to acknowledge the different starting points students might take on their creative learning journey. Not surprisingly, while some students will be enthusiastic, others might initially feel intimidation by this non-traditional learning assessment. In our experience, the majority of students when properly supported do become intrigued to explore and express their learning in new ways.

3.3.4. Example # 4: Write-On and Pass-The-Mic Project

A relational ontological approach to teaching has implications not only for what happens in the classroom but also outside. Establishing positive teacher-student relationships is the foundation of pedagogical relational teaching. As such, a teacher's willingness to engage with students beyond the confines of the classroom plays a significant part in building and nourishing positive relationships that cognitively and emotionally support their students throughout their journeys together. The write-on and pass-the-mic project is an extracurricular activity in which students across all four years of the study program as well as past graduates are invited to come together in safe and creative spaces to engage in discussions and writing groups about topics of interests, which are in turn disseminated via podcast technology. The discussion groups involve critical conversations, personal narratives, and lived experiences. Some of the topics include experiences of exclusion related to racialization, mental health, religious orientation, disabilities, gender and sexual orientation, body image, gender roles, grief and loss, and more.

3.3.5. Example # 5: Learning by Doing Course-Based Research

As part of a fourth-year research methods course, students, in collaboration with the course instructor, engage in a variety of course-based research projects. Moving away from the traditional didactic approach to research methods instructions, which involves the transferring of information about research methods, to an active relational learning approach, students master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing

individual course-based research projects. In teams, students are encouraged to design research projects in non-traditional ways and to make use of creative technologies and expressive arts that serve as modes of inquiry (i.e., method and form of analysis) and forms of dissemination. Examples of data collection and analysis strategies include drawing, photography, video documentary, and creative technology, such as Facebook and web-based survey tools. The arts-based approach to conducting research honors the collaborative meaning-making process that is so central to relational CYC practices more effectively. Unlike traditional research in which the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive, the researcher and the participants in art-based research share a journey of exploration and inquiry. At the end of the course, the course-based research projects are displayed in a public showcase event attended by students, faculty, the general public, and public stakeholders (as can be seen in Figure 10).

Figure-10. Public course-based research poster

4. Discussion

Here, we have illustrated some of the ways in which education approached from a relational ontological point of view can significantly expand the view of teaching and learning beyond traditional learning outcomes by extending the boundaries of how students come to know. Relational pedagogy embraces a social constructivist view of knowledge in which learning is viewed as a social and cultural process that occurs in the contexts of human relationships and activity, not just the heads of individual learners. As such, relational pedagogy offers new opportunities for learning by creating space for experimentation where alternative views can be explored by attending to multiple ways of knowing. In this way they extend student learning beyond logical-linear thinking to include divergent thinking, imaginative and creative expression, symbols and metaphors, and intuitive, affective, somatic, subconscious forms of knowing. Finally, relational pedagogy values relationships as important catalyst for learning. As we stated in our introduction, the conversation presented in this article is an invitation to rethink the ontological foundations upon which CYC education is currently constructed and to explore the potential of an ontological revolution in CYC teaching and learning pedagogy. While we have nothing but the highest regard for CYC educators, we struck by the incongruency of traditional teaching practices in CYC education programs. It is our sincere hope that we have stimulated your interest in further pursuing the research and benefits of a relationally informed pedagogy for CYC education.

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