

COPYRIGHT@IAHSS AN ARTS-BASED CYC PRACTICE SELF-PORTRAIT LEARNING ASSESSMENT: A VISUAL JOURNEY OF SELF-INVESTIGATION, SELF-PROJECTION AND IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract

Following a brief examination on how the concept of personhood (the self) is understood between Western and non-Western cultures and how these contrasting version of the self has historically governed how educators teach and students learn, this article reports on an arts-based child and youth care (CYC) practice self-portrait assignment used to assess student learning for a third-year undergraduate advance practice course that has as its focus the integration of theory, self, and ethical practice. The arts-based CYC practice self-portrait assessment was established as a way to provide a creative context for students to critically self-reflect on and to visually illustrate their journey of becoming a relational-centered CYC practitioner. It allows students to create narratives to share with others that are at once unique, multifaceted, provocative, and illuminating, revealing their emotions, personality, and ethics within wider cultural aspects of their being. The assignment empowers students to own their own ideas, develop their own voices and to listen to the ideas of others and gives students an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate each other's diversity and uniqueness.

Key Words

Arts-Based Education, Child and Youth Care, Learning Assessment, Relational Ontology

INTRODUCTION

Suppose imagination is more important than knowledge, as Einstein believed. In that case, it is of value to reflect on how educational institutions have evolved to be devoid of it, and, even more importantly, how the people who teach and learn within those institutions have been denied a whole human experience. To begin, acknowledgement and exploration of the fundamental differences between Western and non-Western cultures in how knowledge is constructed, what constitutes effective teaching, and what we take as evidence that deep learning has occurred is helpful. One such distinction relates to how the concept of personhood—which, from this point on, will be referred to as the *self*—is understood. History of these different positions can be derived from the Markus and Kitayama [1] research on the cross-culture comparison of self-construal, essentially how people *understand* themselves in relation to others. Markus and Kitayama found that non-Western cultures tend to be collectivist in character and maintain a view of the *self* as interdependent, relational in nature, and inseparable

from social context. By contrast, Western cultures are largely individualistic in nature and hold a view of self-interested, autonomous beings, detached from the external world. It is therefore not unexpected that the dominant pedagogical paradigm of education in Western cultures is ontological individualism, or “ontological realism.”

THE ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENT SELF

In simple terms, ontological individualism asserts that the world and reality exist independently of the observer and their interpretations [2]. It is the belief that the world is comprised of objective facts or truths which allow all human beings to experience a common reality [3,4,5]. It also holds the view of people aka the *self*, “as independent, self-interested, disembodied, and ego-based” [6]. Although the first stirrings of Western individualism are traceable to the pre-Socratic philosophers and the early Christian doctrines [7,8], it is French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist Rene Descartes who is considered the protagonist of ontological individualism [9]. In his *Meditations* (1641), Descartes argues that the natures of mind and body are completely different from one another and that each could exist by itself. He believed that it was only through rational thought that one could arrive at the truth and regarded the perceptions of the senses as questionable [10]. For Descartes, our most authentic *self* is discovered not through relationships and interactions with other human beings and the world around us but through introspection. Captured in his most famous phrase, “*Je pense, donc je suis*” (“I think, therefore I am”), this tragically limited idea continues to set the groundwork for Western education systems. From our first school days through higher education, teaching and learning is designed to impose content on students. The primary purpose of our education system being the discovery of objective truth leaves little space for creative imagination or deeper relational connection. The presence of this pedagogy structured around ontological individualism is spectacularly depicted in Pink Floyd’s classic music video “The Wall” (1979). A searing critique of factory-like structured education, this video highlights the disturbing lack of creative freedoms students are permitted as they are disciplined to become homogenized products of a colourless school system. Hearing the stories of thousands of students over our collective years in post-secondary education, we have found that this artistic representation of education is a sad reflection of many students’ experiences. In the article “21st Century Child and Youth Care Education: An Ontological Relational Turn in Teaching and Learning” Bellefeuille and Bekikoff [11] have this to say,

....one-way transmission of knowledge from educator to student based on methods of rote learning and memorization in which conventional testing methods (e.g., multiple-choice exams, quizzes, academic papers) are used 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. (p. 15)

They go on to claim that, tied to the pressures and influences of an individualistic and reductive system of higher education, even CYC education programs designed by those who should know better have inadvertently adopted transmission-based pedagogies

with an excessive focus on the head, all too often resulting in physical and psychological health consequences.

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. (p. 15)

While this version of the *self* has historically governed how educators teach and students learn, an emerging alternative ontological stance, informed by the growing body of relational ontology scholarship asserts that what primarily exists are not entities such as things and independent human beings, but relationships.

THE ONTOLOGICAL RELATIONAL SELF

From a relational ontological perspective, the “self” is relationally constituted; and as such, considers relationships as the foundation for optimal learning. It is essential to understand that this view does not reject the unique existence of the individual; those traits, goals and aspirations, experiences, interests, and behaviours that differentiates the person from others, but rather understands the *self* as a process of relatedness. Stated differently, the *self* is understood to be not so much a personal possession, but rather a reflection of one’s lifelong relational experiences” [6]. Ken Gergen [12] insists that our relationality with others is fundamental to our very being, without it, we cannot be.

It is not individual minds who come together to form relationships; it is out of relationship that individual functioning emerges. (p. 298)

Educational scholar and feminist Barbara Thayer-Bacon [13] expands upon the notion of relational being by arguing that relational ontologies are non-dualistic ways of understanding the world that “emphasize we are w/holistically connected with our greater universe, materially and spiritually” (p. 7). Sidorkin [14] also concludes that the *self* is a means of connection among relations, human, things, and nature. Before going further, we ask you to recall a time in your life when you were alone, surrounded by nature or simply in your favorite place to escape from the crowd. You might consider the last time you were on a hike in the mountains, sitting in the spray as waves crashed into the ocean, or catching the sun’s warm rays through your window. If you take a few moments to self-reflect, you will likely agree that, even when alone and physically isolated from others, solitude can be profoundly relational. The point is that we are always in a state of interconnectedness with other people and our surroundings. Because, as humans we are relational to the very core of our beings, we are even relationally interconnected with the rest of the cosmos in the form of the air that we breathe and the water that we drink.

THE WHOLE ME: EMBODIED WAYS OF KNOWING

Embracing a relational ontological approach to teaching and learning fundamentally alters how curriculum is conceptualized. While traditional 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 seeks to expand how we see the curriculum by emphasizing the totality 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 swaps a linear approach based on predetermined expectations (e.g., student achievement) for a holistic view of teaching and learning that seeks the broadest development of the entire individual by focusing on the relationship between the head, heart, and soul, all considered essential components of the learning process[11]. Following this reasoning,an arts based CYC practice self-portrait assignment is used as the principal learning assessment for an advanced CYC practice methods course that has as its focus the integration of theory,self, and ethical practice.

THE ARTS-BASED CYC PRACTICE SELF-PORTRAIT LEARNING ASSESSMENT

The CYC practice self-portrait assignment establishes a creative context for students to critically self-reflect on and to visually illustrate their journey of becoming a relational-centered CYC practitioner. It allows students to create narratives to share with others that are at once unique, multifaceted, provocative, and illuminating, revealing their emotions, personality, and ethics within wider cultural aspects of their being. Many of the students take this opportunity to proclaim and to celebrate their spirituality, culture, and other important aspects of their identity. At other times, the self-portrait speaks to a student's curiosity and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding life, and to the feeling of camaraderie with their classmates. The assignment empowers students to own their own ideas, develop their own voices and to listen to the ideas of others and gives students an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate each other's diversity and uniqueness. What follows are three unaltered examples of the arts-based CYC practice learning assessments complete by third year CYC students at MacEwan University.

My Self-Portrait
By Tasha Barrow



Self

The concept of self, or non-self, is perplexing. It feels convoluted and abstract; the more I say, the more I find. I was built on the idea of an individual, with a soul that belongs to a place that cannot be seen. Harder on myself than anyone, I found myself unconsciously taking the blame for things I had no control over and doubting my choices. I was floating in a sea of creation, where the waves and currents molded me. As I delved into the concept of this module, with motivation of my ongoing growth, I came to the realization that the non-self is an opportunity for change, and the catalyst was my 'self'. And as I began my journey, seeking change and growth, I become more connected to others and my own self, but more disconnected from some of the ways I envisioned myself before. I cannot leave behind everything that I am, and so I take them with me, to use and to leave as I continue. In order to build change for those that I will work with through my path as a CYC practitioner, I must believe in the possibility of change of others. To do so, I must believe in my own ability to change and be the driving force of my own story.



Relational Ontology

Despite much of what I tell myself, doubt casts a shadow over me more than I would like to admit. I carry a lot with me, and I struggle with the balance of doing enough and doing too little, which sometimes distracts me from how I am in relationship with others. Even within the creation of my portrait, I am consumed by the task of building, making props, and setting scenes, maintaining some form of control before I struggle through the process of getting these words out. But my nest is comfortable – it's warm and filled with what I (think) I know. I can retreat to it.



Being relational means, I have to venture out again. Although I cannot get rid of all the ways I view life and the world, and I don't entirely want to; there are bits that I need to leave at home so that I can be relational with others. Some of my ontology I frequently left out were things like my faith (partially because it lies with some traditions and overall belief in a God but delves into more spirituality than anything). Others I learned

to leave in my progression through the CYC program, like my defense mechanisms and my views deriving from my socioeconomic status. Yet sometimes I think that I have left them behind when trying to build connections, but they linger. Sometimes I think that I need a means of protecting myself and my views, other times I bring my worries. But not everything needs to be left every time. In order to be genuine, I will need to bring aspects of myself. I will need to be curious and be conscious of how I am impacting those I work with. My journey is far from over, and I will have to fish in any waters I can for the rest of my existence. But I do feel my own growth. My bag is fluctuating as I learn more. I make mistakes, certainly, and will likely have some doubts throughout the process, but I am slowly building onto my net in hopes of understanding more while keeping core structures within the net that fulfill my life and were built as skills to relating with others, like empathy and honesty. When I look at just my net and the things that I have caught and held on to, it can sometimes seem bleak or disappointing. But when I look at the bigger picture, the process, the growth, the connecting to things around me – it is breathtaking. Or giving. Like breathing in crisp air.

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