

## **“Across Virtual Borders: Including Joy through Arts-Based Collaborations in Social Care Practice”**

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Over the last decade, MacEwan University (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada) Child and Youth Care (CYC) students have been visiting Technological University of the Shannon (previously known as Athlone Institute of Technology). During the visit, students joined in on classroom learning, participated in cultural field trips, and collaborated through international social care placements and research projects. The aim of this international exchange was to engage in purposeful knowledge exchange, increase global connections within the field, experience different cultural, historical and systematic practices. Through such an exchange, students, practitioners and educators were able to engage in critical dialogue regarding best practice, barriers to practice, and research and practice innovation.

In 2020, MacEwan students, Gulamhusein and a colleague were welcomed into Coyle’s drama class. Coyle’s students presented their therapeutic story/poetry books that they had designed specifically for different groups of people who are supported in the social care context. Following student presentations, Coyle facilitated a collaborative poetry workshop on identity with the group of Irish and Canadian students. 2021 would have seen another group of Canadian students travel across borders. However, due to the global pandemic, travel was not possible. Gulamhusein remained committed to providing students a global experience. Shifting to virtual ways of educating and being in relation with others led Gulamhusein to invite guest lecturers and practitioners to join a newly formed virtual Global Perspectives classroom.

### A Note on Methodology

Coyle and Gulamhusein’s practice, teaching, and research is grounded in autoethnographic approaches (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), which closely relate to the relational practice framework of social care. This paper continues the autoethnographic narrative approach with the authors sharing their experience of collaborating across virtual borders and how this collaboration has led to the first Global Perspectives in Social Care / CYC symposium that focuses on reimagining social care / CYC practice through arts, nature, spirituality, education and other (ANSEO; Coyle & Gulamhusein, 2021).

### The Journey Together

As the world shifted to virtual ways of being, Gulamhusein was challenged to shift a global perspective in child and youth care course from a travel experience to a virtual setting. One of the approaches to this shift was to invite guest lecturers, scholars and practitioners, into the classroom. By pre-recording interviews with guest lecturers, or having lecturers record presentations, students had access to a new video each week of the semester. Students watched the videos prior to join a live discussion with their classmates, professor, and when possible the guest lecturer.

Having fond memories of the students’ time with Coyle, recognizing the value of exploring the similarities and distinctions between the Alberta CYC context and the Irish context, and with an intentional attempt to ensure various frameworks of practice were explored, Gulamhusein invited Coyle to record a presentation. Coyle, a social care practitioner and artist from Ireland, spoke with the third-year CYC students (45 pupils) about her own practice focusing on how

she utilises arts based collaborative work within the community through participatory poetry, storytelling, mythology and drama. Coyle illustrated how as a result of the pandemic, she had adapted her practice to virtual storytelling, poetry and story creation workshops.

In the follow up discussion session with students a few weeks later, conversation ensued around how feelings of anxiety can be heightened at this time; which art-based mediums the students had personal experience of using in the past, or as children, how it made them feel at that time, and what arts-based mediums, if any, they use now in their work or would use in the future?

#### Outcomes of Critically and Intentionally Journeying Together, Across Borders

Two major outcomes derived from virtually crossing borders. The first was a shift in student perceptions, understandings and practice orientation. The second, the creation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Global Perspectives in Social Care / CYC Practice: Reimagining Social Care / CYC Practice through Arts, Nature, Spirituality, Education and Other (ANSEO).

#### *Shifting Student Practitioners*

As students discussed Coyle's presentation, their renewed sense of creative and joyful inspiration became evident as their video cameras started to turn on, their bodies in upright positions, leaning into their computer screens, and their simultaneous chatter verbally and in the chat-box. Our virtual classrooms lived space started to take a new shape as students spoke about their individual hobbies and passions and their desire to unpack Canadian history and gain further insight into the context that they practice in. Students spoke directly to pursuing courses in Indigenous studies, to learn about the narratives share within the Canadian context and wanting to integrate historical and mythological narratives in their practice.

In addition to the classroom conversations, students were expected to submit weekly reflections. Many of the students noted 'ah-ha' moments regarding praxis (White, 2007). Students started to articulate how their own practice with children, youth and families requires knowing (theory), doing (practice) and being (self) to be fully integrated. An example offered by one student was in regard to their practice in group care. This student noted how their knowledge of developmental theories, non-violent restraint training, suicide awareness, and more was only the foundation of their practice. They continued to speak about how understanding when and how to utilize particular theories and practices was essential to being an effective practitioner. This student went one step further – the 'ah-ha' moment – when articulating that most importantly their practice requires that they show up in a state that allows them to be fully present, to bring with them joy and excitement, and that their passions can also cross the threshold of personal life and practice life. The connection between Coyle and the students led to the understanding that arts-based joy expanded into a multitude of creative, interactive and expression-based social care practices. Some of the examples provided by students include song writing, poetry, visual arts, cooking with cultural influences, sports and recreation, engaging with the natural world (nature), video and board games, meditative practices, and yarn-based arts like knitting and crocheting.

In addition, meaning making was negotiated around feelings of joy encountered by individuals when they had engaged in a specific art work in the past. Conversations of how being joyful through collaborative art-based work with those we support in social care has the potential to be beneficial in relationship development. Dialogue on joyful collaborative arts-based practices led to the question of how one connects to joy through arts-based mediums and the power of including such practice in social care is critical. Coyle and students articulated that the connection between engaging in the art process and the joy it brings should be centred in

practice versus the final product created. Ultimately, making meaning of diverse and joyful collaborations with children, youth and families, led Gulamhusein and Coyle to think about reimagining social care / CYC through arts, nature, spirituality, education and other (ANSEO).

### *Creating ANSEO*

ANSEO, being the Irish (gaeilge) word for 'here', would be familiar to most Irish people as the word they answered to during a teacher's roll call in school. As a teacher called a pupil's name and asked 'are you present?', the pupil would reply 'Anseo, meaning I am here'.

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In the context of social care, the acronym ANSEO is utilised to confirm that we, as practitioners are here, we are present with you, present in the relationship with the child, adult, family or community which we support. We are here with you, working with you through the arts, nature, spirituality, education and other. It is in the being 'anseo' (here) that Coyle and Gulamhusein's work thrives to focus on, to highlight, and to honour, especially during shifts in global interactions due to restrictions (e.g., inability to travel due to the pandemic) and advancements (e.g., increased utilization and collaboration via technology beyond geographical borders).

### In Summary

Having been forced to reimagine a global perspectives course, one that is often accompanied by international travel, allowed students and practitioners to connect from various parts of the world. As a class, Gulamhusein and students were able to welcome in six speakers, Coyle being one of them. During each of the presentations, students were introduced to geographical and cultural histories, policies and political movements that have and continue to impact social care and CYC practices, and unique and often times re-imagined practices to meet the current context and needs of people living in different parts of the world. Being able to reach beyond the Edmonton and Canadian context provided a rich experience that may have been overlooked had it not been for the pandemic. This newly imagined way of being in the classroom is likely to remain a part of the curriculum for years to come, even when travel is a possibility again.

### Author Biographies

Caroline Coyle is a PhD candidate at the Women Ageing and Media (WAM) research centre, University of Gloucestershire, UK. Her study utilises autoethnographic and poetic inquiry to explore older women's identity through their participation in the Festival of the Seasons Celtic Rituals at Uisneach. Other research interests include the use of participative collaborative creative arts, creative methods, relationality, intersectionality, identity through mythology and social gerontology. She uses autoethnography, poetic inquiry and arts based creative mediums such as poetry, storytelling, radio, film, drama, music and art as inquiry tools of discovery to provide a conduit for various voices in the community.

Dr Shemine Gulamhusein is Assistant Professor of Health and Community Studies at MacEwan University in Canada. Her research is focused on grappling with and creating meaning from lived experiences for those who live in the in-between of social spaces. Understandings of intersectionality social justice practices, and advocacy work ground Shemine's academic and professional pursuits. Furthermore, Shemine has a keen interest in the use of narrative inquiry, which she works to also bring into the classroom setting.

### Works Cited

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