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SPECIAL ISSUE

THE STORIES OF OUR EXPERIENCE IN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Storitorial

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Humans are storytelling creatures: Child and Youth Care Workers perhaps even more than most.

We use stories to share our experiences, help others learn, and simply to communicate.

Stories permeate our work with young people and their families. There are, for example, the story of their lives as we enter into it; the story of our lives as we came to be a part of their story; the stories we use to help them understand, grow and develop; the stories we share with each other as workers to help others learn from our experience; the stories young people tell themselves as a way for them to understand their experiences and so many more. Stories are everywhere.

This issue is about stories and story telling. It is about our experiences with young people, families, colleagues and community.

This is the story of this issue.

When we decided to produce an issue about stories, we at first focused on the idea of 'teaching tales' – short stories such as those which might be told in a training to make, or emphasize, a particular learning point. As we talked further, we discussed how stories are everywhere in our field and so we broadened our thinking to the idea of 'stories of our

experience in working with young people and families' and sent out a call for papers through individual and general contacts. In our call for papers, we asked for:

> "stories of experience from which we all might learn. One might, for example, tell a story about how simply 'hanging out' with a young person made a difference or how 'participating in a daily life event' helped build a relationship of trust or, perhaps even how an intervention fell off the tracks or how an interaction helped us to understand ourselves better".

We thought we knew what to expect. Boy, were we surprised when the stories started rolling in. The stories went far beyond what we had initially expected to receive. We all read each of the stories as we needed to agree on each of them for inclusion. Well, we laughed, we cried, we sat in profound awe and respect. We reveled in the creativity of our field. We admired the way authors put forward their ideas, accepted feedback and were anxious to tell their stories. It was as wonderful an experience as one could have as an editor.

And the result is this issue. We hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoyed compiling it.

Here you will find stories of some workers intimate experiences with young people, stories of workers own experience of growth, stories of wonder, of curiosity and awe.

Some of these stories might be what we call classic teaching tales, stories told to convey some learning about practice. However, all the stories offer something for us to learn whether about working with young people or, for example, about our own growth and development as practitioners. So, as you read these stories of experience, we would ask you to reflect on the following:

- What is the learning point in the story?
- How might your practice be impacted if you accept the learning point?
- What other areas of practice are you stimulated to think about as you reflect on the learning points from these stories?
- What have you learned about yourself from each of these stories?

There is learning here, offered to us by those who have shared their stories of experience. We are grateful to all the authors and their insightful contributions.

We hope you enjoy and that as you reflect on the stories shared here, that you too consider your own stories of experience.

Sincerely,
Thom, Jaspreet and Aurrora

Fiction, Frictions, and Truth

Wolfgang Vachon

As someone who came into child and youth care (CYC) through theatre, story has been central to my work, before CYC and since. As a CYC instructor, I/we share stories in the classes I teach. As a theatre maker I draw on stories to create engaging performances, as a CYC practitioner (CYCP) I listen to stories from the young people I work with, and as a researcher I invite stories from those I speak with.

I am currently working on my PhD. A study with CYCPs who have lived in residential placement- group homes, foster homes, and semi-independent living. For this project I've met, spoken, and created audio dramas with CYCPs from care (CYCPfC) who live across Canada. I find the inquiry fascinating, fun, informative, and important. Some of the people I've met don't want anyone to know that they lived in placement (indeed, several would not even "officially" speak with me as part of the project). Others claim this history as a central element of their identity. When CYCPfC talk with me, they frequently share their

experiences in the form of stories. They transform the facts of their lives into compelling, revealing narratives. I listen (and re-listen) to the stories they tell me, stories they tell themselves, and the stories they don't tell.

> A personal narrative is a distinct form of communication: It is meaning making through the shaping of experience; a way of understanding one's own or others' actions; of organizing events, objects, feelings, or thoughts in relation to each other; of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions, events feelings or thought over time (in the past present and/or future) (Chase, 2018, p. 549).

Thinking narratively allows us insight into how, what, and why we communicate. Why and when do we tell the stories we tell? What does that reveal about us? What do we learn about the other person through how they receive our stories? These are the sorts of questions asked, and answered, through narrative inquiry, a process which uses stories (be they auditory, visual, or silent) as a form of research towards understanding self, others, and institutions. It starts by listening to, and for, what the individual is communicating through the narratives they share (and don't). The above quote from Chase also seems to me like a pretty decent way to think about our own work as CYCPs.

Every CYC instructor that I've ever asked tells me they use "stories from the field." Encapsulated wisdom born of practice, shared with students, packaged in a structure that is unique to people. To the best of our knowledge, no other creature on earth tells stories. It has been suggested (Harari, 2014) that the ability to tell stories is what moved us towards becoming the dominant species on the planet. According to Yuval Noah Harari (2014) about 70,000 years ago homo sapiens had a "cognitive revolution" which allowed us to use language in new ways. Moving beyond basic communication (which is accomplished by many species from ants, to monkeys, to whales, and far beyond) humans developed the capacity to form language. Language allowed us to do many things, not least of which was to tell stories. It might even be that the ability to tell stories, and specifically create and tell fiction, is responsible for our "successes" on this planet.

The cognitive capacity to fictionalize, according to Harari, allowed us to move into larger communities, to develop myths, religions, rules, laws, to gossip; thus, allowing us to understand what are and what are not acceptable practices in our communities. Storytelling permits us to keep tabs on each other, to regulate larger and larger groups of people, to learn through means other than direct experience, to benefit from others' experiences.

This is what I am doing each time I tell a story in class. I am sharing successes and failures. Communicating what is acceptable and what is not. Inviting reflection, debate, more stories, more experience. I am teaching through my experience to people who have not yet had the experience, and asking them to teach me, and the rest of the class, from the experiences they have had. In an introductory relational practices course I teach, I start each semester by beginning, but not completing, stories based on my experience. It is a compelling and engaging way to start the year, and students remember the stories right to the end of the semester. I complete these tales as the year progresses, tying them into different topics of the course (usually saving one story for the very last day, which students will frequently ask me to finish).

Me: remember that story about the young person who showed up needing to leave their family and find a place to stay, but wouldn't say why?
Students: Yes.
Me: Let's talk about relationship building and how a child welfare call works.
Me: Remember that story about the guy who showed up intoxicated to the group I was facilitating?
Students: Yes
Me: Let's talk about relational dynamics and different therapeutic approaches to treating addiction.
Me: Remember that story…
Students: Yes.
Me: Let's talk …

People remember stories, because we have evolved with stories, and they have become a central element of who we are as a species. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) write, "stories are discursive ways of doing or accomplishing something. The narrator or storyteller actively shapes or constructs narrative reality to achieve particular descriptive, rhetorical ends—be they personal myths or extraordinary events..."(p.7). Stories are how we make meaning; it is how we shape and construct our realities. In many respects not only do we make stories – stories make us. We create ourselves and the world we live in through our stories: our cultures, identities, professions, ethics and values are all constructed through the stories we tell (Harari, 2014).

One of the things I struggle with regarding the sharing of stories as a CYC practitioner, educator, and researcher is: are they mine to share? The stories I tell as an educator, for example, are about me, but they usually involve other people. Of course, I don't reveal details of who the people are, but I also don't always know who is listening. The stories I chose to share, I share because they teach something or provoke conversation. This frequently means they have unique features, features which might reveal who the people in the story are, if people know some of the elements or some of the people. This became evident to me one day at the beginning of a semester. As students entered the first class one approached me and asked if I used to work in a particular place. I had. In a warm, friendly, and unsolicited manner, they started to give me an update on some of the young people who used to access that service. It quickly became apparent that one of the stories I had planned to tell that day in class—linked into several lessons throughout the semester — would involve people that this student knew. Following an initial moment of panic and last second re-organizing of the entire semester's lesson plans in my head, it was a lovely teaching moment for me, and the class. After asking permission from the student, I revealed the dilemma I was faced with and said that because of confidentially reasons I would not be sharing some things that I had planned on sharing that day. This opened up an informative conversation about relational practice in action. Fortunately, I had many other stories I could draw on that afternoon; unfortunately, I had no idea if any of the other students might know any of the other people.

This is not a unique situation. I've taught students who I've had prior professional relationships with, I've had students know guest presenters I've brought in, I've had students identify people in the stories I've told. All of these situations sit uncomfortably for me. It is one of the reasons I am drawn to fiction. Fiction allows for the pedagogical value of the story without the risk of disclosing information about someone. In the PhD work I'm doing, we take the stories and experiences people share and turn them into audio dramas, into fiction (see TuningIntoCYC.org to be launched in summer 2021). While everyone involved in the project signed a consent form allowing their information to be used, the CYC community in Canada is relatively small. Identities may be unintentionally disclosed, information shared that people may not want known at a later date. What we agree to at one point in our life, might be different than what we want known at a later point. As such, the audio dramas don't reveal the specific details of a particular person. Instead, we weave stories together, add new context, create composite characters based on multiple people, shift, alter, manipulate, obfuscate, all with the intention to ethically share the material (the findings, the "data") while minimizing the risk.

Variations of this are done all the time in CYC, social work, nursing, counselling and numerous other classes. Educators strive to tell stories while minimizing the risks. For ethical reasons I change names, omit information, am intentionally vague about details that might divulge specifics. And while doing all this, from a place that I believe is correct, I wonder where the line is. When does the story slip from truth into, "based on real events", when does it slide into fiction, when might it become a lie? And does it matter? I remember, years ago, speaking with a college about these sorts of dilemmas. Their solution was to make up stories. They told me they fabricated stories all the time to tell in class. Situations that never happened to them or those they worked with (that they were aware of), but they would tell these stories as though they were real and came from the direct experiences of themselves and the young people they supported. From their perspective the pedagogical value was the same. The students think the story is real, they will treat the story as real, and the class conversation will happen as though the story is real. But there is no risk to having an unintentional disclosure. No risk of revealing inappropriate information. No risk of breaking confidentiality. Of hurting those they

worked with. For this colleague, to tell a fictional story was more ethical than telling stories that are about actual people, if you do not have their permission to tell those stories. This colleague had no lack of stories, they had worked for decades and had a vast repertoire of incredible experience. Indeed, it was this very experience that led them to make this decision.

I have not asked every young person I ever worked with if I could share moments from our lives together in order to teach others. I am confident some would give permission for some stories, others not. I have also heard stories about myself told by others without my permission. Sometimes these are uncomfortable to hear, sometimes I have learned from them, and sometimes they have been harmful. In my formal inquiry processes and theatre work, I always seek permission, and don't use that which is forbidden. When telling stories, I strive to maintain a balance between pedagogy, ethics, and relationality. And because of this, I wonder what "stories from the field" I should tell, if any. When is it okay, when is it voyeuristic, when is it exploitative, when is it wrong? I work in fiction because of the possibilities it creates and the ethics it allows. I work in CYC for similar reasons. While telling stories might be part of what makes us human, being humane requires us to think of our part in the story we want to tell.

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Stories of Experience

Jack Phelan

I often smile at how easy it is for CYC's to overestimate the ability of our youth to understand language that we think is obvious, because it is logical to an adult. I am humbled when I occasionally realize that my "obvious" meaning was totally missed by the young person because I was both not being very empathic and being very self-centered in my communication.

Two quick examples –

I was standing at an outdoor pool, greeting the youngsters from our agency, when Jose, a 10 year old walked up. He had recently returned to us and as he passed by I greeted him, "It's good to see you're back, Jose". He stopped, looked puzzled, and tried to see what was on his back.

Bill, a 14 year old, was being coached to respond appropriately at his upcoming review meeting, by being urged to use "I-messages". After the meeting, Bill was asked how he was doing, he responded, "My eyes are killing me."

Caring for Connor

Michelle Perchard

I met Connor when he was 14 years old and placed in an Individualized Living Arrangement I was supervising. Connor was the only young person in this arrangement

Information

Relational Child and Youth Care Practice (formerly *The Journal of Child & Youth Care*, established 1982) is committed to promoting and supporting the profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people.

This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, including personal growth and development, are essentially "relational".

Certain pieces in *RCYCP* have received peer review. However, we do not peer review all articles as we choose not to exclude those voices where peer review would be inappropriate or on request from writers.

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Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

Relational Child and Youth Care Practice is committed to providing equitable and inclusive spaces that promote and support the global profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people, families and communities. This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, are essentially "relational".

Relational Child & Youth Care Practice welcomes submissions on all aspects relating to young people, families and communities. This includes material that explores the intersectionality of Child and Youth Care practice and the lived experiences of all who are engaged in Child and Youth Care practice. Considerations will also be given to interpersonal dynamics of professional practice and all submissions that assume a relational perspective. This might include topics such as cultural values, ethics, social policy, program design, supervision, education, training etc. Welcomed are also submissions that address advocacy, social justice and reconciliation practices within the diverse spaces and places of Child and Youth Care. Each issue may include refereed articles that comply with acceptable 'academic' standards; submissions contributed by regular and guest columnists; short pieces that describe particular relational experiences and reflections; poetry; artwork and photographs.

Material should be submitted by email to rcycp@press.cyc-net.org in standard word processing format (eg. .doc, .rtf). Formal articles should not exceed 6000 words in length (excluding references). Referencing should conform to either APA or Harvard format. Author-date citations should be used within the text and a double-spaced reference section should accompany each article. In all submissions, authorship details including an abstract of no more than 150 words should be included, as well as a short list of keywords at the beginning of the article, a headshot photo and a short author bio of about 100 words to publish with your article. Importantly, authors should also indicate whether a peer review is required (in addition to the standard editorial review).

Although no article or submission will be rejected purely for stylistic reasons, the editors reserve the right to return any manuscript for additional work. Authors requiring editorial assistance in this regard should indicate their request in a covering letter. Originality of material is the responsibility of the primary author. Previously published material must be identified as such and will be published only where the necessary permission has been granted from the original source.

Relational Child and Youth Care Practice may include Peer Reviewed contributions, stories, case studies, thought pieces, experiential descriptions and other forms of writing which will not be peer reviewed. In this way we aim to strike a balance between the values of Peer Reviewed articles and experiential voices from the field. This is a unique approach and one which we feel offers the best of both. Peer Review is available on request.

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