

# Knowing, Doing and Being in Context: A Praxis-oriented Approach to Child and Youth Care

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**Abstract** Engaging with youth and families in collaborative and respectful ways; taking practical actions to create the conditions for young people to experience meaning, worth and connection; supporting them to imagine hopeful futures for themselves; and bringing oneself fully to the therapeutic relationship are all hallmark characteristics of child and youth care (CYC) practice. Those who do this work and those who prepare practitioners for the field recognize the need for conceptual frameworks that can adequately represent the complexities of everyday CYC practice. By taking up the notion of praxis as knowing, doing and being in context, I hope to plant some fresh seeds to animate and extend current conceptualizations of everyday CYC practice.

**Keywords** Child and youth care · Praxis · Conceptualizations of practice · Professional development

Like many of the other human caring professions, everyday child and youth care (CYC) practice is complex, unpredictable, and value-laden. It is also highly relational work that is deeply embedded within very specific local contexts. Engaging with children, youth, families and communities in collaborative and respectful ways; taking practical actions to create the conditions for young people to experience meaning, worth and connection; supporting them to imagine hopeful futures for themselves; and bringing oneself fully to the therapeutic relationship are all hallmark characteristics of CYC practice. Those who do this work and those who prepare practitioners for the field recognize the need for dynamic conceptual frameworks that can adequately represent the complexities of everyday CYC practice, while also offering a practical tool for critical reflection and analysis.

Building on the work of others who have highlighted the thoroughly interpretive and ethical dimensions of CYC practice (Garfat 2004; Nakkula and Ravitch 1998; Ricks and Bellefeuille 2003; Stacey 2001) and drawing from other strands of postmodernism,

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including social constructionism (Gergen 2000), pragmatism (Fishman 1999), hermeneutics (Schwandt 2002; VanderVen in press) and narrative approaches (Freedman and Combs 1996; Pendlebury 1995; White and Epston 1990), I hope to plant some fresh seeds to animate and extend current conceptualizations of everyday CYC practice. To begin I introduce the concept of praxis. It is defined here as ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable action, which reflects dimensions of knowing, doing and being. Next, as a way to contextualize my contribution I provide a very brief history of the field of CYC. This includes a brief consideration of other related postmodern perspectives as well as a critique of some of the conceptualizations of CYC practice that have recently been advanced. The final section, representing the main contribution, includes a series of tables that explicate various ways of knowing, doing and being. A graphic illustration of some of the specific contexts and ecological influences that give shape and meaning to everyday CYC practice is also included. By outlining some of the conceptual underpinnings of the field and by locating them within a postmodern, non-linear perspective, my hope is to offer a potentially useful resource for guiding, advancing, analyzing and researching everyday CYC practice.

## Praxis

The concept of praxis has enjoyed a resurgence of late and has been enthusiastically taken up by theorists and practitioners working across a diverse range of academic disciplines. The notion of praxis occupies a central place in the professional literature of many of the human caring professions, including teaching, nursing, health care and social work (Carr 1987; Dorazio-Migliore et al. 2005; Nelson et al. 2004; Tarlier 2005). In many people's minds, the term praxis refers to the integration of knowledge and action (theory and practice), which is indeed a core feature of the concept. It is however much more than that. Briefly, praxis is a concept that finds its origins in Greek philosophy, particularly the teachings of Aristotle. For Aristotle, praxis was "guided by a moral disposition to act truly and rightly; a concern to further human well being and the good life" (Smith 1999). Friere (1970) also wrote extensively about the place of praxis in emancipatory education, highlighting the role of values, respect, dialogue, and action in the effort to "make a difference in the world." Schwandt (2002), following from Habermas suggests that "*Praxis* does not require knowledge of how to make something, but knowledge of how to be a particular kind of person; it is 'action-oriented self-understanding'" (p. 49).

While the term praxis roughly corresponds with contemporary understandings of practice, there are a few unique and important features that distinguish praxis from commonsense understandings of practice. Specifically, theory and practice are integrated and one does not precede nor hold greater value than the other (Carr 1987). Praxis is creative, "other-seeking" and dialogic (Smith 1999). It is the place where words and actions, discourses and experience merge (Stacey 2001). Praxis includes conscious reflection both on and in practice (Tarlier 2005). Praxis is expressed in particular contexts and thus can never be proceduralized or specified in advance (Schwandt 2002). Finally, praxis is guided by practical wisdom (Schwandt) and is expressed through committed moral action (Carr) and practices of accountability (Stacey 2001).

Picking up on some of the core features of praxis identified by these theorists, for the purposes here I am defining praxis as ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable action. In other words, praxis involves knowing, doing and being. The use of verbs is deliberate and signals the active and dynamic character of praxis. Within the field of CYC,

there are diverse ways of knowing, doing and being and these *actions* always get expressed within specific historical, sociocultural, political and institutional contexts. Language, context, values, situated meanings, dialogue, relationships and multiple interpretations all play a role in the approach I develop here, revealing its decidedly postmodern character (Bohman et al. 1991; Fishman 1999; Gergen 2000). Many of these ideas will be taken up in a later section.

First however, I need to situate this particular contribution within a rich theoretical and practice tradition that has been actively shaped by the contributions of many gifted CYC educators, practitioners and scholars<sup>1</sup> (Anglin 1992; Beker 2001; Denholm 1990; Fewster 1990; Garfat 2003; Krueger 2004; Maier 2001; Mattingly 1995; Nakkula and Ravitch 1998; Pence 1987; Ricks 1989; VanderVen 1991). Their diverse contributions have laid the groundwork for the emergence of a distinct, multi-vocal community of practice which, to take but one contemporary example, is regularly made visible through the lively, diverse and thoughtful discussions currently underway on the CYC-Net (<http://www.cyc-net.org/network.html>). By building on this rich foundation, I am engaging in a form of theorizing that could best be described as “imaginative reflection on possible modifications of practice” (Bohman et al. 1991).

One other point of clarification is in order. I am writing this from the perspective of a relative newcomer, that is, someone who is joining a scholarly discussion that is already in-progress - a position which can be both risky *and* (hopefully) facilitative. I am carrying with me my own intellectual traditions and disciplinary training (psychology, counselling, education), practice experiences (residential child and youth care, child and youth mental health, prevention and health promotion, community development) and personal life history and social location (white, heterosexual, middle-class, 4th generation Canadian) as I embark on this task.

It is my hope that by critically and respectfully engaging with a diverse range of resources and intellectual traditions that I will be able to offer a perspective that is creative, generative and useful to the CYC field. As others have noted,

Changing circumstances and encounters with other practices can nourish the imagination; and since no practice is defined for all possible situations, there is always need for imaginative projections and creative decisions in pursuing a practice... (Bohman et al. 1991, p. 13)

## Locating the Child and Youth Care Field

Child and youth care (CYC) is an active and diverse, relatively new field of professional practice that is broadly concerned with promoting and supporting the optimal development and well-being of infants, children, youth and families in specific contexts through approaches that focus on individuals *and* their social circumstances and environments. CYC work is deeply rooted in a strong set of values and principles, including: holistic, strengths-based, context sensitive, developmentally-informed, collaborative, and committed to social justice and diversity (Mattingly and Stuart 2002; Corney 2004; School of Child and Youth Care 2005).

<sup>1</sup> The number of individuals who have made a significant contribution to the CYC field are too numerous to mention and inevitably this is an incomplete list. My apologies for the omissions.

Of considerable interest here is the ongoing dialogue regarding the nature of CYC work, which includes various attempts to explicate and legitimize the field's existence and activities. As early as 1982, following the Conference-Research Sequence in Child Care Education, a series of principles and guidelines were developed to guide those involved in the planning and delivery of child and youth care education (Peters and Kelly 1982). Later, a Code of Ethics was developed to signify the field's status as a formal profession (Mattingly 1995). Several authors have tried to define the essence of CYC work (Anglin 1992; Ferguson and Anglin 1985; VanderVen 1991), which has occasionally included attempts to distinguish the CYC profession from other related fields of practice like social work (Anglin 1999; Bates 2005) or counseling (Phelan 2005). Others have described a distinctly CYC approach to working with families (Garfat 2003; Ricks and Bellefeuille 2003).

### The Rise of Postmodernism

Paralleling developments in other professional fields and consistent with the emergence of postmodern ideas within the social and human sciences generally (Fishman 1999; Polkinghorne 1988), many CYC practitioners and scholars have articulated some of the limits of positivist epistemologies and have expressed concern over the encroachment of overly mechanistic models and proceduralized approaches into CYC practice. For example, some have suggested that CYC work might be more appropriately conceptualized as a craft based on its distinctively practical and emergent character (Eisikovits and Beker 2001). Such a conceptualization of CYC work has clear implications for professional development.

Such work cannot be effectively standardized...because its success is a function of the practitioner's interpersonal sensitivity in applying the requisite knowledge and skills contextually in situations where the need is determined in part by the dynamic and often unpredictable responses of all those involved (p. 418).

Others have expressed concern with the limitations of rule-based formulations and so-called "value-neutral" approaches to practice and have called for more personal, embodied, narratively informed and situationally immersed understandings of practice (Corney 2004; Krueger 1997; Ricks and Bellefeuille 2003). Constructivist and hermeneutic (interpretive) approaches to CYC work, which highlight the role of self-understanding, language, dialogue, and context have also been well-articulated (Fewster 1990; Garfat 2004; Hoskins 1996; Nakkula and Ravitch 1998; Ungar 2004; VanderVen in press). These approaches recognize that CYC work, with its emphasis on self-reflection and mutual transformation, are thoroughly ethical endeavours (Nakkula and Ravitch 1998). More critical perspectives, which illuminate the political and sociocultural forces that serve to perpetuate inequities among marginalized groups, including many youth and families, have also been advanced (Skott-Myhre 2003).

Clearly there is no one singular or final view of CYC practice and it is the embrace of multiple perspectives, openness to critique, and serious, respectful engagement with each others' ideas that lends the field its richness. In an effort to keep pace with the field's growing diversity, various models for preparing CYC practitioners have been developed, including the generative curriculum model used in early childhood education (Dahlberg et al. 1999) and the Knowledge, Skills and Self (KSS) model (described below). It is out of this rich history that several different ways of thinking about, describing, and teaching

CYC practice have been advanced. It is to some of these models and conceptualizations of CYC practice that I now turn my attention.

### Conceptualizations of CYC Practice

Various models and descriptions of CYC practice have been developed over the years, including the umbrella model (Denholm et al. 1983), the cube model (Ferguson 1991), and the ecological onion model (Ferguson 1991). Each new image and metaphor appears to reflect an increasing appreciation for the complexity and ecological character of CYC practice. These models—which incidentally have been defined as “curriculum models” as opposed to models of practice—have done a good job of mapping the scope of the field. They are largely descriptive in nature (i.e. they name the settings where the work typically occurs, the target audiences, and the types of interventions used) and testify to the field’s growth over time. Two specific conceptualizations of CYC practice will be briefly reviewed below: the KSS model and the more recent North American Certification Project: Competencies for Professional Child and Youth Work Practitioners.

#### *Knowledge, Skills and Self (KSS)*

The KSS model, which has occupied a central place in the School of Child and Youth Care (SCYC), University of Victoria curricula for many years, offers students and practitioners new to the field an efficient and easy-to-grasp understanding of the unique character of CYC practice.<sup>2</sup> What began as a conceptual tool for guiding curricula development in the applied tradition of a professional school (Ferguson personal communication 2007), soon became a primary pedagogical resource for helping CYC students understand the unique character of CYC work. It was an approach that explicitly recognized the practitioner’s values, beliefs and experiences in making meaning of the social world (Ricks 1989). It was this notable emphasis on the “Self” that served to signal the field’s distinctive commitment to developing and valuing qualities of reflexivity and critical self-awareness among CYC practitioners (Fewster 1990).

#### *North American Certification Project*

More recent efforts have been undertaken through the North American Certification Project to articulate the specific competencies required of CYC practitioners across a number of broad domains including: professionalism, applied human diversity, applied human development, communication and relationship, and developmental practice (Mattingly and Stuart 2002).<sup>3</sup> In addition to identifying specific foundational knowledge and associated competencies within each of these broad domains, there is also an explicit statement of nine foundational attitudes that underlie all professional CYC work. The focus on knowledge, competencies and attitudes is consistent with the categories of knowing, doing

<sup>2</sup> A more recently developed model expands on KSS by making explicit links between the CYC field, the post-secondary curriculum and client outcomes (Stuart and Carty 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Based on consultation with faculty and staff in the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, these domains have been extended to include community capacity building and social policy.

and being that I am advancing here and yet there are some important distinctions in the way these ideas are being conceptualized which I will discuss in a later section. For now, it is important to acknowledge that the North American Certification Project reflects a high level of collaboration, careful thought, rigorous analysis and adds much needed clarity to directing the future growth of our field.

### Critical Commentary

Despite the considerable strengths of both the KSS model and the North American Certification Project, each of them in their own way implicitly conveys a rather flat view of practice whereby knowledge is *acquired*, skills are *mastered*, attitudes are *adopted*, self-awareness is *gained* and then these *things* are applied to children, youth, families and communities. Such a conceptualization of practice (and pedagogy) is consistent with the technical rational paradigm that is currently favoured by funders and policy-makers across a wide range of health, education and social care fields (McKee Sellick et al. 2002; Usher et al. 1997). Guided by an instrumental view of practice, this approach is centrally concerned with the development of results-oriented goals, clear measures of success, and the demonstration of tangible, measurable outcomes. Such a narrow and mechanistic approach to characterizing practice is often taken-for granted. Program logic models, which are increasingly demanded by funders, are but one expression of this. At one level, we are comforted by the clarity and certainty that these unproblematic conceptions of practice seem to promise,

Increasing scrutiny and pressure from agency administrators, insurance providers, and consumers to prove that we know what we are doing and that what we are doing really works, makes us susceptible to the clarion call of the empirical practice and evidence-based practice movements. Their certainty is seductive, an answer to our desire for real competence (McKee Sellick et al. 2002, p. 493).

Without question, it is important for CYC practitioners to be able to articulate what they are doing and why and to what effect. My intent is not to reject or replace a competency-based approach, but rather to expand the possibilities for thinking about CYC practice in a way that explicitly recognizes its social, moral and political character (Schwandt 2002). Helping practitioners to practice wisely by helping them to cultivate a respect for principles *and* an attunement to particulars is a stance that Pendlebury (1995), who borrows from Nussbaum, describes as “perceptive equilibrium;” a concept that has much in common with the notion of praxis being developed here.

As a starting place, we need to recognize that a narrowly defined, technical rational view of practice that is based on the assumption that the complexity of practice—and professional development—can be adequately conceptualized and measured by discrete “outputs” like knowledge, skills and attitudes can be highly problematic. This is because “practice situations are not only unique, they are also characterised by a complexity and uncertainty which resist routinization” (Usher et al. 1997, p. 127). As Schon (1983) famously said,

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing ‘messes’ incapable of technical solutions (p. 42).

I contend that a more contextually rich, theoretically informed, explicitly moral, and dynamic view of CYC practice is needed. In the next section I will describe a praxis-oriented approach for understanding and analyzing CYC practice that attempts to respond to the diverse and emerging needs of the field.

### Praxis as Knowing, Doing and Being

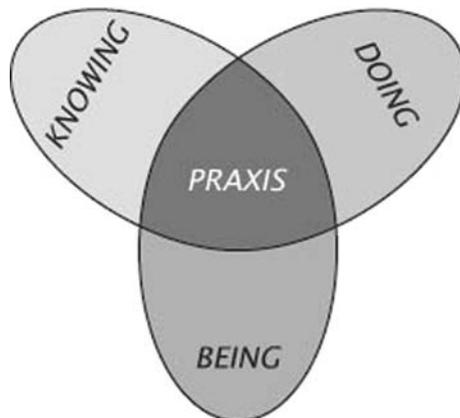
Praxis, which is ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable action involves the reciprocal integration of knowing, doing and being. Consistent with the thinking of others calling for a re-imagined view of professional development in the human services field (VanderVen in press) the perspective on praxis being presented here also attempts to collapse the sharp—rather unhelpful, yet historically entrenched—distinction between theory and practice. Praxis is thus seen as the active integration of knowing, doing and being and is visually depicted in Fig. 1. The use of verbs is deliberate since taken together, these actions respond to the question, “what is to be done?” *the* question that remains at the heart of any practice (Usher et al. 1997). In many respects, with these linguistic moves one could say that I am “verbing” the world of practice.

Clearly there are multiple ways of knowing, doing, and being that contribute to self-aware, ethical, responsive and accountable practice in the CYC field. What follows is a description of some common ways of conceptualizing knowing, doing and being in CYC. This is not intended to be an exhaustive description of everything a CYC practitioner will ever need to know, do, or be in order to become to be a competent and caring CYC practitioner. Instead, it is offered as one entry point to a community of practice and a tradition of working that is firmly rooted in a solid foundation. I have also made every attempt to make this model compatible with the material included in the North American Certification Project (Mattingly and Stuart 2002). In the sections that follow, I will further unpack each of these contributions to praxis with the understanding that this is but one potential view for thinking about and engaging in CYC practice as opposed to the final word.

#### Knowing

There are multiple ways of thinking about knowing and types of knowledge that guide CYC practitioners in their everyday work. Indeed, it is the development of a specialized

**Fig. 1** Praxis as knowing, doing and being



body of knowledge that typically defines a profession (Eisikovits and Beker 2001; Hoyle and John 1995; Usher et al. 1997). Given the complexity and holistic character of CYC work however, it would be unreasonable to assume that a single form of knowledge (e.g. experiential or empirical) could reliably guide practitioners in every practice encounter, an observation that has convincingly been made by others in the human caring professions. For example Tarlier (2005) writing about the need for multiple ways of knowing in nursing writes, "...praxis demands epistemologies that are sufficiently broad to support all of its complexities" (p. 129).

Many very useful attempts have already been made by others to categorize different ways, types and patterns of knowing that are relevant to CYC practice. For example, Artz (1994) suggests that our feelings serve as important ways of knowing. Feminist scholars (Goldberger et al. 1996) have challenged conventional understandings of what it means to know, leading to new epistemological orientations inspired by women's ways of knowing. Much earlier, Aristotle theorized about three different forms of knowledge: *episteme* (theoretical, contemplative knowledge), *techne* (action-oriented, pragmatic and productive knowledge) and *phronesis* (practical and context-dependent deliberation about values or "wise judgement" (Greenwood and Levin 2005; Schwandt 2002).

While it is not the intent here to provide a systematic review of the diverse epistemologies informing CYC practice, it is important to declare my own orientation which is grounded in a postmodern, social constructionist, hermeneutic perspective that locates and understands knowledge-making in particular relationships, communities and traditions (Gergen 2000; Schwandt 2002; Taylor and White 2000). Five assumptions about knowledge/knowing are guiding this work (Greenwood and Levin 2005; Tarlier 2005):

1. Knowledge/knowing is inherently social and collective
2. Knowledge/knowing is always highly contextual
3. Singular forms of knowledge/knowing (e.g. empirical *or* experiential) are insufficient for informing complex, holistic practices like CYC
4. Different knowledges/ways of knowing are equally valid in particular contexts
5. Knowledge is made, not discovered

One way to assist CYC students and practitioners start thinking about the diverse ways and types of knowing that are relevant to CYC practice is to name them. Of course the danger of such an exercise is to inadvertently leave an impression that there is such a thing as a fixed or final way of thinking about knowing in CYC practice. This is *not* the message I want to convey. Instead, with Table 1, what I am offering is one potential approach to considering the diverse ways of understanding and thinking about knowing in the CYC field as part of an overall praxis orientation. Such a conceptualization is designed to challenge taken-for-granted ideas about knowledge, call attention to the social process of knowledge-making, and heighten practitioner reflexivity (Taylor and White 2000). I fully expect that this will evolve over time as others engage with it.

It is important to remember that the distinctions being made between various ways of thinking about knowing are not this sharp in reality. This artificial way of categorizing knowing is designed as a tool to aid teaching and support analyses of practice. The questions are included as a way to invite further reflection and to remind students and practitioners of the value of drawing from and critically examining multiple ways of knowing when trying to make sense of the social world and their place in it. While a key strength and a unique aspect of CYC work is the profession's explicit valuing of multiple ways and forms of knowing, Table 1 is not meant to be a grocery list from which practitioners

**Table 1** Some ways of thinking about *knowing* in child and youth care

Knowing	Key questions	Common characteristics	Example(s)
<i>Self understanding</i>			
Values, beliefs, feelings	Who am I? What might I become?	Rooted in relationships and communities of meaning	Recognition and articulation of personal values, feelings and experiences
Assumptions	Where do I come from?	Always incomplete/partial	Locating understanding of self and others within social, cultural and historical traditions
Biases/prejudices	What do I stand for?	Determined/limited by available language	Ability to reflect upon one's own impact on others
Relational identities	How does my social location influence how and what I can know and who I can be?	Sharpened through critical reflection and engagement with others	Reflexivity
<i>Practical/Experiential</i>			
Tacit/craft knowledge	How is this situation like or unlike others I have encountered?	Individual/private	Practical wisdom
Narrative knowing	What is the story here?	Usually unarticulated and uncritically accepted	Clinical judgment
Routines/habits	What does my experience tell me?	Action-oriented	Trial and error knowledge
Subjective "lived experience"	How should I act in this moment? What is my gut telling me?	Contextualized Often felt in the body	"Speaking from the heart" "Common sense" Practice stories
<i>Professional</i>			
Professional knowledge, values and ethics	What does my profession tell me is the right way to proceed? What professional resources are available to guide me?	Public Codified/Sanctioned Rooted in specific intellectual traditions and communities of practice	History of the profession Professional values statements Codes of ethics Pre-service curricula/professional development

Table 1 continued

Knowing	Key questions	Common characteristics	Example(s)
<i>Creative/Artistic</i>			
Intuitive	What metaphors might apply here?	Expressed in multiple forms	Art/Poetry
Aesthetic	Which of my senses are activated?	Open to multiple interpretations	Play
Improvisational	What rhythms am I noticing?	Unpredictable	Imagination
	What possibilities can I imagine?	Symbolic meanings	Beauty
<i>Theoretical/Empirical</i>			
Research	What does the scholarly literature say?	Public/Open to scrutiny	Research findings/evidence
Theory	How can these resources help me?	Systematic	Theories (e.g. applied human development, change, learning)
	Are these claims plausible/viable/credible?	Often text-based	Perspectives and paradigms (e.g. critical, feminist, postmodern)
	How do I judge the worthiness of these ideas?	Advancing truth claims	
		Rooted in specific intellectual traditions	
<i>Communal/Dialogic</i>			
Co-constructed knowledge	What interpretations are we making together?	Constructed with others	Co-generated local knowledge(s)
Local knowledge(s)	What are the implications of these ways of listening/talking?	Developed in dialogue	Cultural stories and rituals
Community wisdom	What cultural/traditional stories might have relevance?	Collective	Communities of practice
Knowledge-making		Sedimented	Intellectual traditions
<i>Critical</i>			
Exposes relations of power	Whose interests are being served?	Committed to social justice	Critical analysis of practice discourses
Locates knowledge in social, cultural, political and historical contexts	What social, cultural, historical, and political forces have contributed to the emergence of this issue?	Questions the givens or status quo	Articulation of social group membership/location
Questions the “givenness” of social facts and reality	Whose voices have been silenced?	Exposes asymmetrical relations of power	Recognition of systemic forms of oppression and privilege

**Table 1** continued

Knowing	Key questions	Common characteristics	Example(s)
<i>Philosophical/Epistemological/Ethical</i>			
Understandings of human nature/reality	What is human nature/reality? What counts as knowledge?	Concerned with truth, reason, knowledge	Assumptions about the nature of knowledge (e.g. objectivity, subjectivity)
Nature of knowledge	Whose knowledge counts?	Rooted in specific intellectual and historical traditions	Worldview
Understandings of right and wrong	What is the good and right thing to do?		Ethical deliberation

can pick-and-choose their favourite “way of knowing” as a way of justifying their own idiosyncratic and unexamined approach to practice.

By proposing a tentative language and a set of questions for thinking about various ways of knowing, the hope is that CYC practitioners can begin appreciating the possibility for multiple ways of reading and seeing the world. Deftly navigating between general principles and concrete particulars to respond to the situation at hand, being able to rely on intellectual traditions and imagination to respond freshly and creatively when faced with the novel or the unknown, having an emotional investment in how things turn out – these are the characteristics of a wise and discerning practitioner according to Nussbaum (1990). Describing this quality as a special form of perception, she writes, “Perception, we might say, is a process of loving conversation between rules and concrete responses, general conceptions and unique cases, in which the general articulates the particular and is in turn further articulated by it” (p. 95). By challenging CYC practitioners to articulate *what* and *how* they know, and by supporting them to begin clarifying their own epistemological stance based on self-understanding, practical wisdom and experience, theoretical, artistic, empirical, philosophical, constructivist and critical theories and ideas, a richer, more open—and importantly a more problematic—view of everyday practice is possible.

## Doing

In addition to the multiple types and ways of knowing in CYC work, there are a number of specific skills (ways of doing) that contribute to ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable practice. Table 2 summarizes some of these skills and competencies. Even though knowing, doing, and being are being analyzed separately for the purposes of explicating this framework, it is important to remember that there is a great deal of overlap and praxis is the enactment of all three.

The upper half of Table 2 describes the specialized skills and competencies that are understood to be foundational for competent practice in CYC as identified by the North American Certification Project (Mattingly and Stuart 2002). CYC work involves intervening with individual children, youth and families *and* their social environments. This requires skills in professionalism, direct client care, program planning, social justice advocacy, plus an ability to strengthen social environments and analyze social policies.

In addition to developing specific competencies in each of these content areas, CYC practitioners also need to be especially skilled in their critical thinking, reflection and analytical skills. Thus the skills of noticing/attending, interpreting/making meaning, collaborating/deliberating, acting/self-reflecting, and articulating/justifying have been separated out for particular attention and are described in the lower half of Table 2. Many of these critical thinking skills overlap with the different forms of knowing introduced earlier.

## Being

Much has been written about the special and unique personal and relational qualities that distinguish CYC work from other helping and caring professions (Anglin 1999; Fewster 1990). Many of these qualities represent the active expression and embodiment of values and virtues as well as ways of being in the world. Often, these values and relational qualities are difficult to teach to new practitioners, in part because these qualities cannot be easily “pinned down” with words. As overall ethical orientations and habits of mind

**Table 2** Some ways of thinking about *doing* in child and youth care

## Specialized professional CYC skills

Domain	CYC competency <sup>a</sup>	Example
Professional identity and conduct	Professionalism	Professional/ethical conduct and work habits Professional boundaries Facilitation of others' learning Ability to give and receive feedback
Direct client care and engagement	Applied human development Communication and relationship Developmental practice	Needs assessment Client engagement and communication Therapeutic change skills Group facilitation Family support
Program planning, implementation and evaluation	Developmental practice Community-capacity building	Program design Identification of indicators of progress Program evaluation
Social justice advocacy	Applied human diversity	Diversity competency Identifying systemic barriers and forms of oppression Inclusive practices
Strengthening social environments and social policies	Community-capacity building Social policy	Community capacity building Social support enhancement Policy analysis/critique
Critical thinking and reflection skills		
Domain	Key questions	
Noticing and attending	What am I noticing? Where is my attention drawn? What is my initial account of what is happening?	
Interpreting and making meaning	What are my hunches about what is going on? What role is my own history and experience playing? How is my language/description affecting what I see? What are some of my working truths or tentative conclusions?	
Collaborating and deliberating with others	Who will I talk with/listen to about this? How can I enlarge my perspective about this? Am I willing to shift my position in light of new information? Do I need to revise my account of what is happening? What sense are we making together?	

**Table 2** continued

## Specialized professional CYC skills

Acting and self-reflecting	What choices do I have?
	What is my decision/action?
	What are the intended and unintended consequences of my actions? What have I learned for next time?
Articulating and justifying	What are my reasons for acting this way? On what grounds (e.g. ethical, legal, empirical, professional) have I taken this action? How will I articulate my reasons in public? How will I practice accountability?

<sup>a</sup> These CYC competencies include those developed by the North American Certification Project (NACP) (Mattingly and Stuart 2002), and those identified by the School of Child and Youth Care. These competencies continue to be defined and debated in the field and will likely evolve over time

(Eisikovits and Beker 2001) these “ways of being” are typically not conducive to being counted and measured.

Some authors have relied on metaphors to convey the uniqueness of CYC work. For example, Krueger (2004) likens youth work to a modern dance. Others have suggested that being in child care is a “journey into self” (Fewster 1990). Writing about the need to reconceptualize practice in the broader field of evaluation, Schwandt (2002) following Rorty, advances the idea of the practitioner as “strong poet;” a metaphor that resonates with CYC practice very well:

...the ability to deliberate well rests on the habit of attentiveness or interpretive perspicuity by which one recognizes what is at stake in a particular situation. This is a kind of insight, an awareness of the morally relevant features of a situation. This ability might be spoken of as the *poetics* of practical reason, for it invokes images of a creative, inventive, imaginative mind; one with an ability to decipher a situation (emphasis in original, p. 53).

What he and other writers are suggesting is that wise practice is inextricably linked to qualities of discernment, engagement, and imaginative reflection; reflecting an overall stance of “being with” as opposed to “doing to.” Thus, the issue of “knowing how to be” is a critically important feature of praxis and figures prominently in becoming an ethical, self-aware, responsive, accountable CYC practitioner. Table 3 summarizes some of the types and ways of being in CYC. Many of these ways of being are the expression of specific moral values, ethical commitments, and orientations to the world.

### Knowing, Doing and Being in Context

Child and youth care (CYC) work always takes place within a broad context of intersecting influences, some of which we are directly aware (e.g. agency mandates or client needs) and some of which seem more remote or less directly connected to our everyday work with children, youth and families (e.g. government policies, funding decisions or social and historical forces). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, which highlights the interacting and reciprocal role of multiple influences on children’s development, occupies a central place in most conceptions of CYC practice.

**Table 3** Some ways of thinking about *being* in child and youth care

Orientation	Characteristics	Key questions
Mindful and self-aware	Active and interpretive Ongoing self-reflection and monitoring Recognition of the influence of one's own history on current practice Acceptance of one's own limits	What is it about this client that reminds me of my own experience? What biases am I bringing to this situation? Do I have some of my own "unfinished business" to attend to? How do I make sense of my own reactions to this client in this instance? What other interpretations are possible?
Relational and collaborative	Based on trust, presence, connection and mutuality Actively works to minimize the power differential Collaborative goal-setting	How can I join with this child, youth or family? How can I co-create a climate based on mutuality and trust? How will I draw from the client's strengths and perspectives? Who can I talk with/listen to about my reactions?
Curious and open	Rooted in a posture of "not knowing" Honours client knowledge and expertise Emphasis on understanding	How does this child, youth or family see and make sense of the world? How can I stay open to their experience and ways of understanding? Whose view of reality is being privileged?
Respectful	Support for the integrity, dignity and self-determination of all clients	How do my actions and words convey my belief in the fundamental dignity of this person?
Strengths-orientation	Engaging clients as persons, not labels Each child, youth and family has strengths and resources that can be mobilized Protective factors exist within individuals and systems/environments	How can I speak out against the practice of reducing human beings to labels or diagnoses? What specific strengths or unique perspectives/ knowledge(s) does this child, youth or family bring to this problem or issue? How can I work to mobilize/call forth this knowledge?
Caring and responsive	Emotionally invested "Being with" versus "doing to" Human connection Empathy, warmth and genuineness Moral engagement	What are some features in the social environment or community that can further promote client competence and well-being? How am I conveying care and compassion through my presence? How will I recognize when I am no longer practicing from a place of care? What specific actions do I need to take?

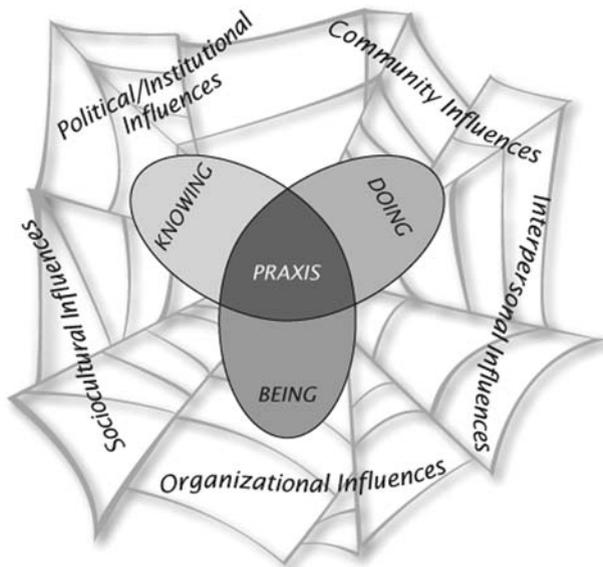
**Table 3** continued

Orientation	Characteristics	Key questions
Holistic	Sees the “whole child or youth” in context Concerned with the emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual growth and development	Am I seeing the “whole child” or just his/her symptoms or behaviours? How does my involvement with this child, youth or family affect other areas of their life?
Inclusive and participatory	Supports the emergence of the child/youth voice Actively works to involve children, youth and families in decision-making	Whose voices are being heard? Whose voices are being silenced?
Situationally immersed	Recognizes the particularities of place and context Attuned to local norms	How can I increase youth participation in this decision-making process? What is going on in this particular moment? What are some of the most salient features to attend to?
Social justice advocacy and accountability	Recognizes systemic barriers to full and equitable participation Takes responsibility for recognizing and addressing forms of oppression and privilege	How is my decision affected by this place or setting? In what ways do I enjoy certain unearned benefits (privilege) as a result of my social group membership (e.g. gender, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, class)? How might these privileges be unwittingly blinding me to certain client realities? What will I do about this? How am I practicing accountability?

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model can also be adapted and applied to understanding the complexity of CYC practice. It is typically represented through concentric circles. In order to move away from the idea that contextual influences on practice are isolated, discrete dimensions (which is one of the limitations of using the concentric circles model), the metaphor of a web is being introduced here to depict the active, intersecting, embedded, shifting and asymmetrical qualities of everyday practice. Figure 2 illustrates a number of common social forces and institutional influences that taken together, create the complex and dynamic context for a praxis-based (knowing, doing and being) approach to CYC.

Such a view of CYC work enables us to “see” the number and range of potential influences on our practice (Nutley and Davies 2002) and the metaphor of the web provides one way of illustrating these multiple, intersecting and reciprocal influences. Community influences include local knowledge, understandings and expectations, the local service delivery context and media influences. Interpersonal influences recognize the relational character of everyday CYC practice, including relationships with and expectations of children, youth and families; relationships with peers, colleagues, mentors and supervisors; and relationships with community members and other service providers. Organizational influences refer to local workplace norms, policies and resources, agency mandates and professional routines. Sociocultural influences include social, cultural and historical factors, including relations of power. Political/institutional influences include government legislation and policies; funding decisions; discourses of professionalism and practice; post-secondary training and professional associations; and regulatory bodies.

Finally, we are all caught in this web together and there is no such thing as standing apart to “see the world as it really is” (McKee Sellick et al. 2002). Ultimately, this conceptualization is designed to highlight the centrality of praxis (knowing, doing and being), while simultaneously recognizing the inter-subjective, contingent, and context dependent character of everyday CYC work.



**Fig. 2** Knowing, doing and being in a web of influences

## Implications for Professional Education and Practice

As an educational resource, this approach offers students a glimpse into the complexity of the work, highlights its active and relational character, activates curiosity and reflexive practice through posing generative questions, and it provides an initial language for discussing and analyzing a variety of practice narratives and encounters. For example, students can be invited to analyze their own experience working with a child, youth or family (or reflect on prepared cases), using the questions in the tables as a guide for thinking about how and what they know and what the source and history of some of these ways of knowing, doing and being might be.

As an analytical tool, this framework builds on and extends existing conceptualizations of CYC practice. Specifically it may be of benefit to researchers who are interested in studying everyday CYC practice from a perspective that recognizes the contingent quality and inherent unpredictability of practice and who are interested in studying how practitioners understand and make sense of this complexity in their everyday work. For example, when faced with the dilemmatic aspects of practice, which ideas, theories, actions and values do CYC practitioners favour? What is the history of these ideas? What intellectual traditions are being sustained? What are the consequences of framing and responding to practice challenges and dilemmas in these ways (Gergen 2000)?

Child and youth care (CYC) practice, much like nursing, teaching and social work, is characterized by diverse ways of knowing, interpersonal relationships, practical obligations, value-laden decisions and complex ethical challenges, all of which take place within a complex context of sociopolitical, historical, cultural and institutional forces (Nutley and Davies 2002; Taylor and White 2000; Tarlier 2005). The conceptual framework being presented here attempts to convey a realistic and lively view of practice; one that challenges traditional “knowledge transfer” views of practice. It is predicated on a belief that by critically reflecting on our intellectual traditions and ways of knowing we are practising an important form of accountability.

...our accountability to the people we serve will come not from efforts to prove the authority of our knowledge, nor from efforts to dismantle it and prove it groundless. It will come instead from a more reflective and dialogic engagement with our knowledge, and with the people served through it—an engagement that seeks constantly to problematize our knowing, to probe and critique it, to trace its origins and assumptions, and explore its implications, to open it to inquiry and transformation (McKee Sellick et al. 2002; p. 493).

Clearly CYC work is more than just learning some theories, adopting some attitudes, and mastering some skills that can be applied in a straightforward, unproblematic manner when the time is right. Instead, CYC practice, like most human caring professions, is characterized by choices and dilemmas, ambiguities, ethical tensions, and competing sets of interests about what constitutes good and right action and our models need to reflect this messiness and complexity, while still providing a constructive way forward (Nutley and Davies 2002; Schon 1983; Taylor and White 2000). We need more approaches and conceptual tools that can accommodate the dilemmas, uncertainties, and paradoxes of practice while also supporting the development of reflexive, critically conscious, praxis-oriented practitioners. It is my hope that the ideas presented here offer a step in this direction.

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