



“ Pull down your pants, and slide on the ice” : medical students’ experiences of a creative writing workshop

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Abstract

The humanities are increasingly being introduced into the medical curriculum. Suggested benefits include increased observational skills and ability to consider alternatives or perspectives thus leading to improved person centred, empathic and clinically excellent care. A pilot creative writing workshop was offered and six students volunteered to take part. The workshop was facilitated by a general practitioner poet who conducted two 3-hour workshops and included in-between a writing activity with students receiving feedback. Each student also undertook a learning preference inventory and agreed to a one-year follow-up. The data from the inventory was analysed; each student scored differently on the four learning preference dimensions. Five themes emerged in the follow-up qualitative survey: creative arts a surprise; creative arts appreciated; the impact of the workshops; continuing to write; more creative arts opportunities. More initiatives are needed for humanities in medical education. These can be introduced to develop particular skills and/or humanities substituted for teaching or assessment methods in existing topics.

Keywords: Creative work; Education, Medical, Undergraduate; Humanities; Students

Introduction

There is a growing endorsement for the inclusion of the humanities or creative arts within medical education; however, resultant changes in student attitudes,

behaviours and technical skills are yet to be verified.[1] Humanities are credited with helping medical students develop innovation, perspective, observation, alternative views, professionalism, humanism and empathy,[2,3,4] which

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leads to doctors who treat patients with "compassion, fairness and excellence".[5] The humanities not only focus on the aesthetics, they challenge formulaic ways of thinking and acting; the latter, although they increase efficiency, may reduce patients to "risk profiles" and deprive them of the "capacity for uniqueness and change".[6] Introducing and validating the use of creative arts also supports ongoing use in professional practice.[7]

The University of Otago offers a thirty-six hour medical humanities selective within the preclinical years and there is growing interest to include opportunities in the three clinical training years as well. Building on positive student responses to a clinically based creative art assessment option,[8] the university piloted, within the Primary Health Care and General Practice Department, an optional, creative writing programme for medical students in their final two years. A respected New Zealand poet and general practitioner offered a programme comprising two 3-hour workshops, each four-weeks apart and provided individual feedback on student creative writing. The workshops included general principles on writing, the influence of writing on clinical practice (and the converse) and how writing takes you from the particular to the universal. The participating students contributed either poetry or narrative writing for feedback. We sought to evaluate the impact of the programme on students, one-year post-workshop, and to see if those participating had similar learning styles.

Material and Methods

The university ethics committee granted approval to undertake the study (No. D15/069). Pre-workshop, the students completed a Learning Styles inventory,[9] and agreed to a one-year follow-up qualitative survey via email.

Data Analysis

Results of the qualitative survey were subjected by the authors to thematic analysis.

Results

Two students in year-six and five in year-five enrolled (one then withdrew) and five of the six students completed both workshops (the sixth student could not return to the second workshop, but still submitted work). All completed the Index of Learning Styles. Four out of the six students sent in their one-year follow-up responses to an emailed written survey.

Felder and Soloman Index of Learning Styles: The six students each rated different combinations of the four learning style dimensions. Five were global rather than sequential learners; four were visual rather than verbal learners; four were sensing rather than intuitive learners and three each were active or reflective learners.[9]

Survey themes

Students wrote of their expectations regarding creative arts in the medical curriculum, what they recalled of the creative writing workshop, and their engagement in creative writing since the workshop. Five themes emerged.

Creative arts a surprise

Students had not expected any creative arts opportunities in the medical curriculum.

"I didn't really expect the curriculum to include any creative elements at all."
(One)

"I expected medical school to be light on using creative methods as a learning tool. I was even slightly surprised at the opportunities offered to us, despite wishing there were more. The humanities [s]elective was slightly shorter and not as creative as I would have hoped, but was

still a good experience. Being able to submit a creative writing piece as an assignment (in 4th year) was very rewarding." (Two).

Creative arts appreciated

Students valued the opportunity to take part in the creative writing workshop.

"I really like [X]'s writing. I have previously been interested in writing and written occasional pieces for the NZMSA (the student association). I wanted to try and develop my writing a little." (One)

"I enjoy being creative and saw this as an opportunity." (Three)

The impact of the workshops

One year later, students recalled the elements of the workshop that they found most helpful.

"Very enjoyable, non-judgemental, very helpful in terms of improving my writing skills." (Four)

"He gave some really good specific feedback for the piece of writing I prepared, but what stayed with me mostly was the general advice he gave, summarised as "pull down your pants, and slide on the ice" ." (Two)

Continuing to write

Three students described using creative writing to explore personal experiences or clinical practice since the workshop and one had thought about it.

"I often write about things that have affected me personally. I often at least draft pieces of writing about experiences that have had an impact on me. I have also been writing the first year house officer blog." (One)

"It has crossed my mind to use it in reflection at some points though this has not progressed the pen to paper at this stage." (Three)

More creative arts opportunities

Students wanted more creative art options in the medical curriculum

"Medicine involves communicating with

people and requires understanding and quite often some lateral thinking. The creative sides of our brains should be engaged throughout medical school." (Three)

"I think it's a really valuable experience and having more opportunities would be fantastic. The workshop was a real highlight for me and I hope it or something similar can continue." (Two)

"A great way to remind people about the art of medicine!" (Four)

Discussion

This very small study based in one university, included a limited number of self-selecting students who represented a diversity of learning styles. Students' written responses one year later established that they appreciated taking part in the workshop and wanted other similar opportunities throughout the medical curriculum. Their responses support the use of creative arts as tools to process clinical and personal challenges and to "explore the feelings, perceptions, experiences, relationships and stories of human beings".[5]

Including humanities in a crowded curriculum requires lateral thinking. Depending on topic and learning outcomes it may entail extra courses for particular skill development or alternatively replacing existing pedagogical approaches. For example, using the humanities and creative approaches to learn about life stage, illness experience, human activity or clinical procedures is likely to bring diverse insights, in contrast to those gained through essay writing or multi-choice questions.

If humanities courses are optional, students who do not attend will never recognise the depth, breadth and impact of this approach.[10] Neither will they be enabled to "make strange" what they see

in clinical practice and to have students to these benefits and may spark assumptions and perspectives disturbed or an interest in the creative arts for disrupted in helpful ways, in order to see ongoing pleasure and professional the world anew.[6] Requiring attendance, sustenance, irrespective of learning style will expose

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