

Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

Cinema and Theater as Training Tools for Health Students

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The arts offer media through which human nature can be observed and analyzed in different surroundings. Cinema and theater, for example, provide social, anthropological, and cultural knowledge about people in different times and environments and in this way help interpret and understand human life.¹ Using a particular aesthetic to communicate the artist's point of view, the arts may serve as tools in health education,² preparing university students to optimize interventions for people under their care.³

Searching for new strategies that help construct ethical insights and responses to everyday dilemmas, a group of teachers of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira, Colombia, chose to explore cinema and theater as tools to increase awareness of situations that affect ordinary people and that may influence their physical and mental health. One of our main motivations was to create opportunities for meeting people from different health programs such as medicine, nursery, psychology, sports and recreation, and other humanities areas; and for freely discussing teachers' and students' different points of view without academic pressure. With these goals, over the last 4 years

we developed a training program in our Faculty of Health open to the entire university community that uses cinema and theater as learning tools to explore ethical issues.

One activity of this program is a weekly film screening attended by undergraduate and graduate health professions students, mainly from the fields of psychiatry, ethics, and the humanities, as well as the general university community. At the end of the screening, a psychiatrist-moderator facilitates identification of the principal components of the movie—the cinematographic language, the content, the characters, and their similarities to everyday life. Then a general discussion occurs in which participants freely express their thoughts about the movie according to individual experiences. The moderator encourages every student to communicate his or her position, whether contradicting or confirming the ideas expressed by the others. Finally, the moderator summarizes and concludes the session. The movie and discussion are the subject of subsequent activities as well: the psychiatry students compose an essay about the film in which they elaborate on their own opinions and describe what they gained personally from the movie and the forum. Ethics, values, and humanities classes assign each movie to a student group that prepares a presentation for the class, which then serves as the basis for a discussion about ethical dilemmas of the future health worker.

The forums have been exciting and prolific activities in which participants avidly discuss their impressions of the films with others. Films have proved to be a way to discover what students think about topics that otherwise would have remained hidden, such as their opinions on politics or about the conflicts in Colombia, which affect people's health but are frequently ignored by health professions students. The discussions are oriented not only toward the clinical issues addressed in the story but also toward the human content; surprisingly, the latter is the focus that participants find more interesting. Of particular note, medical students have learned to consider the opinion of other health professions students, who have a lot to say about their jobs and how physicians should interact with them to best help patients. Meeting with students from humanities areas such as philosophy, arts, or pedagogy brings new elements to the discussion because these students' arguments primarily concern the human factor. As a result of these cross-disciplinary encounters, health professions students have realized that they have to pay careful attention to their assumptions and priorities in clinical encounters because medical issues can easily overshadow the human concerns that may matter more to patients. Another important realization has been the need to communicate more clearly with patients and their families to establish a proper relationship built on mutual confi-

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dence and respect between health workers and other people.

Students have also expressed that viewing these films helped them reflect on decision-making strategies for helping patients and their families to follow the most appropriate pathway for their circumstances because each film is in essence a tale about success or failure after a specific choice. How the consequences of a certain situation would have changed if different paths had been followed is one of the main foci of the discussions in the forums. Analyzing this relationship between actions and consequences has given students tools to apply when they talk with patients, and, according to anecdotal information from instructors, students are actually applying these tools in clinical settings.

Students' post-screening essays and presentations reflect the ideas expressed during the forums but have also been a critical exercise with confrontations between students' own points of view and those expressed by others. For example, topics such as abortion or euthanasia provoked an explosion of negative opinions, but many people also recognized the validity of the arguments from those who were more supportive. It appears that students have learned a readiness to respect others' opinions, even if contrary to their own, a contribution to tolerance and freedom of expression that will have significant value in clinical contexts.

The second central activity of the program has been the formation of a theater group that its members named *La Escafandra* (The Scuba). The name is symbolic of what the theater means to the School of Health: a means to help breathe in a sea of exhausting academic

tasks by creating a space for artistic expression as well as enjoyment. The group consists of a basic core of students, teachers, and administrative employees of the Faculty of Health who dedicate themselves to promoting the theater as an educational tool, not only for those who participate in its productions but also for those who attend and talk about the plays. The theater group has four plays in repertoire, which have been shown on diverse stages, obtaining recognition at a national level. These plays have been incorporated into educational programs focused on sexuality, generational conflicts, student problems, and doctor-patient relationship and have generated stimulating discussions about topics such as health systems, poverty, human rights, politics, sexual and gender discrimination, and displacement resulting from war.

The director of the theater group, with more than 25 years of experience as an actor, director, and dramaturge, has the dual role of doctor and artist. Each presentation is followed by a discussion forum about the play in which the public gives its opinions about the theater experience and expresses its ideas about the contributions of the play to health education. Participants in theater activities have developed both nonverbal and verbal communicative skills that help them interact with patients, families, and colleagues in ways that optimize the clarity and immediacy of the messages that they want to convey. Moreover, theater helps to direct the attention of participants to polemic topics through artistic language, which allows talking about them in a more relaxed context and facilitates expressing opinions and discussing contradictions.

The experience of the last 4 years has shown an alternative for pursuing the ethical and personal development of the Faculty of Health students. It has taught tutors and lecturers to explore other tools for medical education, in a more relaxed and sympathetic environment than wards and classrooms, enjoying artistic expression while considering situations that help highlight common problems. It is difficult by other means to include so many situations that challenge students' ideas and confront them with the realities they will have to face as health care workers. While students may enjoy and benefit from a work of art they have experienced on their own, they derive significant added value when they encounter the positions of others and can have discussions directed by teachers with experience. In this way, students gain decision-making skills and can improve their communication abilities with patients, colleagues, and other health workers, thus deepening their understanding of their role as health workers in the lives of the people who will be under their care.

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