Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

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Feature Editor

Editor’s Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

Teaching Humanities Through Opera:
Leading Medical Students to Reflective Attitudes

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Humanities are useful resources for helping medical students develop themselves as human beings. There is a growing concern about the human dimension of future physicians and how it can be taught or reinforced in the educational environment. Emerging technology tends to monopolize students’ attention and learning efforts, often at the expense of other important aspects of medicine. In addition, medical students are, in general, young people who are learning to be physicians at the same time that they are developing their adult personas. Medical educators must recognize this and provide ways for students to reflect on general subjects related to culture and the humanities from the medical perspective. The humanities have become a collabora-

tive methodology in medical education often used in family medicine departments.

In Brazil, there is no family medicine context in the undergraduate curriculum, and departments of family medicine are absent from medical schools, as well as formal teaching of humanities. SOBRAMFA—Brazilian Society of Family Medicine—is composed a handful of family physicians but involves more than 100 students interested in this specialty. Through ongoing medical education courses, SOBRAMFA promotes several scenarios to teach interested students how to develop the patient-centered approach and humanistic doctoring.1

Experiences related to arts, literature, and even cinema are included in the literature. However, music—and specifically opera—references by and large are missing from the medical bibliography.

This project is an extracurricular experience that has been headed by SOBRAMFA for 6 years, with students coming from six different medical schools in São Paulo, Brazil. The project can be portrayed in three acts like an opera performance.

First Act, First Scene
Preparing for the opera, describing the scenario

The project consisted of attending 15 opera performances (Table 1) in two theatres in the city of São Paulo. Forty students participated in the project, none of whom had attended opera previously. Before attending, students received an initial explanation of the libretto and highlights of the opera. This helped prepare students for the performance and facilitated a receptive and informed learning environment. This groundwork was laid by reviewing movie scenes dealing with opera, as well as watching brief clips of some operas themselves.
First Act, Second Scene
Using movie clips involving opera to facilitate understanding

Since most of the students were not familiar with opera, the first step was to introduce them to the context. Using movie scenes involving opera music was useful to remove fears about attending an opera performance and perhaps getting nothing from it.

As an example, several scenes can be put together, as described below, and shown to the students before attending the play.

Pretty Woman
(Time counting: 1:24:11–1:26:35)

This is a particularly useful scene, since the protagonist, a working-class young woman, has never attended opera before and is afraid of not understanding it because it is in Italian. The students identify with the movie character and understand how it is possible to admire and react with emotion to opera, despite the singing and language differences.

The Shawshank Redemption
(Time counting: 1:07:00–1:09:46)

An opera song is broadcast into the prison yard. “I don’t know what the Italian ladies sang that day, and I don’t mind. All I can say is that it was so beautiful, like a dream, and all the prisoners, for some minutes, felt free” (a speech by one of the prisoners, played by Morgan Freeman).

Philadelphia
(Time counting: 1:21:04–1:25:31)

This is probably one of the best “opera lectures” performed in the cinema. Tom Hanks, a corporate lawyer dying of AIDS, explains Maria Callas’ aria from “Andrea Chenier” to Denzel Washington, the lawyer who is somewhat reluctantly defending him in a job discrimination suit. As Hanks translates the lyrics, points out the music and instruments, and invites Denzel Washington to feel the pain in the singer’s voice, the speech becomes a moving explanation of the purest meaning of opera.

Second Act—Attending the Play

The following points came from the discussion following the play, as well as the insights the students give on further appraisal.

Being There as a Group

Students emphasized that attending the operas as a group led to an atmosphere uniquely conducive to reflection and sharing. They stressed that this experience was absolutely different than reading a book, even different than watching a film, both of which can easily be done individually with follow-up group discussion. Opera is a total experience of immediacy, and the most important thing is “being there” as a group engaged in the context.

Pure Characters

Students further pointed out that the opera characters are “pure and clean,” in contrast to those commonly portrayed in the movies, who are closer to real life. The opera characters are shaped to exhibit archetypal temperaments, so virtues, passions, and deficiencies show up sharply and are well defined. The power of opera, therefore, doesn’t depend on the unexpected attitudes of the characters, as they are already known, but on the way they are presented through a particular dramatic play. Students realized that in daily life they do not have the opportunity to deal with such larger-than-life characters, so the opera performance brings into focus new knowledge about human behavior and exposes them to the broad universe of human experience.

Performance Accesses the Affective Domain

Students commented that the union of music, language, and drama created a unique impression, directly touching their emotions. During the operatic performance, students noted that they were also able to cope with their emotional responses, since they had more time to process feelings compared to the movies, where the emotional impact comes in faster sequences.

Opera Works, Even in Italian

The impact of the singers’ acting compelled students to focus on the performers’ interpretation more than on the script subtitles, which were shown on the screen simultaneously. In the opinion of the students, it was the characters’ live presence that most deeply affected them, and the libretto moved to the background.

Third Act—Discussion Group.
Grand Finale in an Italian Restaurant

After attending the opera performance, discussions were held among the students and teachers, even relatives who joined the group. In São Paulo, it is easy to find an Italian restaurant open at night after an opera performance. It proved...
to be a proper environment to start
the open discussion and hear the
students’ comments and reflections.

This experience promoted reflec-
tions among the students about their
own perceptions and the emotions
they felt, and this reflective attitude
persisted over time. Students no-
ticed that opera has what they call
a “delayed effect,” with new issues
emerging long after the actual at-
tendance at the performance had
occurred. For this reason it is diffi-
cult to appraise opera learning
projects exclusively through the
discussions immediately following
the event. Follow-up evaluation is
important, since additional insights
may emerge as a result of students’
ongoing reflective process. Particu-
lar passages coming from opera
continued to be useful to students
in terms of evoking attitudes about
daily behavior and values (love,
compassion, jealousy, forgiveness,
revenge, comprehension) as well as
stimulating self-examination and
disclosure of emotional responses,
which in turn promote new reflec-
tions. In life, the most important
attitudes, values, and actions are
taught through role modeling and
example, a process that acts directly
on the learner’s emotions. Since
feelings exist before concepts, the
affective path is a critical shortcut
to the rational process of learning.
The students’ involvement with the
opera performances also acted like
a catalyst to encourage their inter-
est in understanding the human di-
mension of being a doctor.

Conclusions

This analysis is based on student
discussions and reflects their own
perceptions. Overall, these findings
suggest that although opera is not a
familiar art form in the Brazilian
culture, the students had highly
positive responses to the project and
were eager for a follow-up experi-
ence. When introduced in a didac-
tic way, opera can be a new educa-
tional method for teaching humani-
ties. Studying opera plays and at-
tending opera performances di-
rectly influence students’ affective
domain and emotions. Exposure to
opera leads students to be reflective
and emotionally open, which in turn
helps promote empathic attitudes,
enriches professional values, and
develops students as well-rounded
human beings.

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