



excerpts from

Creative Minds in Medicine

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COMMUNITY
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case study

devising healthy communities



Katherine Burke leading a session at Rainey Institute
Photo courtesy of Katherine Burke

humanizing medical training

For a little while during his 2011-12 academic year, medical student Vincent Cruz stopped reading textbooks and played with clay, instead. But he wasn't neglecting his studies.

Cruz and a classmate were finding out how making art with clay helps brain-injured patients get better. The pair had already sat in on a number of sessions with the Art Therapy Studio's Traumatic Brain Injury clay-studio group, observing "the amazing ability of the human brain to 'rewire' - how the physical act of working with clay (using hand-eye coordination and motor skills) helped promote this process," he writes in a recent e-mail. "It also reminded us of the importance of self-esteem and expression through the arts ... to patients who otherwise are incapable of communicating their complex thoughts and feelings."

And that, in two sentences, is the entire point of the Program in Medical Humanities and its Devising Healthy Communities project for medical students at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University, where students are learning that the arts offer them a deeper way of understanding patients, communities, themselves and the health of all three.

"Arts are a democratizing force," says Martin Kohn.

Kohn, who has a Ph.D. in education, runs the Program in Medical Humanities of the Center for Ethics, Humanities and Spiritual Care. He believes that being a doctor means more than being a fact-driven scientist; it is important for medical professionals to understand not only their patients' humanity, but also their own. Kohn long ago recognized that the arts can be one of the keys to the personal meaning often locked away in the name of objectivity.



Martin Kohn presenting on Devising Healthy Communities
Photo by CPAC

To help data-swamped future doctors get in touch with the creative, cultural and emotional sides of human beings and recognize that those areas directly affect health, Kohn devised an arts-based qualitative-research experience for first-year med students in collaboration with Katherine Burke, an adjunct member of Kent State University's theater faculty. The idea is to give students opportunities to observe artists working with patients and other members of the community and see the effects of arts activity on people as well as the communities in which they live. They develop research and reporting skills in the process, write personal reflections and, at program's end, relate the story of that community-arts experience to others.

Burke describes the program as different from other arts-based learning. “It’s really an opportunity for the students to learn about Cleveland and find out what it means to be part of the community,” she says.

It also helps students find their own voices, express their own feelings and share their own stories with the people around them, Burke explains: “The way in which one tells a story has a way of forming an identity” for both the storyteller and the community listening to him or her.

It also provides insights about the direct effects of the arts on health. As Cruz writes, observing the clay studio “was an important exercise to see how art in the community – much like nursing homes, outpatient offices and rehab facilities – is integral to the well-being and recovery of patients weeks/months/years after leaving the hospital, since this is often difficult to appreciate when we are so focused on the immediate tasks of in-patient medicine.”

For the 2013 program, 33 first-year students were divided into four groups to observe and report on the community work of one of these four professional artists: performance poet Katie Daley, who was working with the visually impaired at the Cleveland Sight Center; DJ Doc, a hip-hop artist who worked with young people on music and gardening at the Fresh Camp in Cleveland’s Glenville neighborhood; Cleveland ceramics artist Angelica Pozo, who worked at Merrick House in Cleveland’s Tremont neighborhood; and Burke herself, who brought theater activities to University Settlement in Cleveland’s Slavic Village.

Kohn’s commitment to helping members of medical communities express themselves goes back to his early years at Northeast Ohio Medical University, where he founded an innovative poetry contest named after William Carlos Williams, a famous American poet and a doctor.

But it wasn’t until he had co-founded and begun co-directing the Center for Literature in Medicine at Northeast Ohio’s Hiram College that he had a real epiphany about arts and medicine. He had started collaborating with the then-named Great Lakes Theater Festival, working with theater artists on a narrative bioethics program and

The Medical Humanities program has sought to help medical students reflect on their identity, their role in society and larger cultural patterns as they face the issues – mundane and profound – of their chosen profession.

“It just opened up my world,” he said. Soon, Kohn was connecting med students with performers, authors and, after his move to the Clinic, with the whole spectrum of culture, from episodes of “Scrubs” to half-day workshops at the Cleveland Museum of Art. In this way, his Medical Humanities program has sought to help students reflect on their identity, their role in society and larger cultural patterns as they face the issues – mundane and profound – of their chosen profession.

Kohn’s approach helps turn a young doctor like Bryan Sisk into a different type of physician: one who is not only a scientist, but a human being, as well.

“Patients want doctors who aren’t robots,” said Sisk, a former Lerner College student now back in his Missouri hometown for a pediatric residency at St. Louis Children’s Hospital/Washington University School of Medicine. He found that the group writing exercises, thought-provoking speakers and the wide range of arts and media that made up his training in humanities at Lerner have given him the ability to cope better with his patients’ feelings and his own.

“Having the tools to fall back on and center yourself” is a big help, Sisk said. “I feel stresses have been minimized by the training I’ve had. I feel better off.”



Left: DJ Doc's (pictured) session at Famicos Foundation
Right: Rainey Institute
Photos courtesy of Katherine Burke

About the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture

CPAC is a nonprofit with a mission to strengthen, unify and connect greater Cleveland's arts and culture. Research is a core component of our work, and one of many ways we support arts and culture. CPAC provides counsel related to public policy that benefits the sector and the broader community. It provides a number of tools through cultureforward.org and mycreativecompass.org for arts and culture professionals and those who would like to engage with them. CPAC also carries out a variety of programs and services that help build the sector's organizational and business practices to support a vibrant, thriving greater Cleveland. www.cultureforward.org

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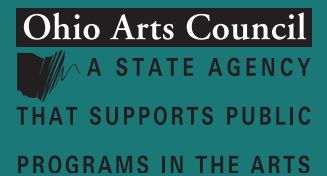


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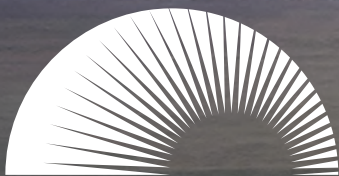


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