

Using art and literature in Medical and Healthcare Education: a case study in Obstetrics and Nursing at Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele

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BACKGROUND

Incorporating art and literature into healthcare education has emerged as an innovative strategy to enhance essential skills such as emotional intelligence, communication, and empathy among healthcare professionals (Zannini 2008; Lake et al. 2015; Bleakley 2015). This case study focuses on the Specialist Course in Obstetrics and Nursing Pedagogy at Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, where art and literature were integrated into a 16-hour module (Healthcare Pedagogy), part of the “Methodologies and Tutorial Didactics” course. This interdisciplinary approach was employed for four consecutive years, with the latest iteration during the 2024-2025 academic year.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A structured methodology blending works of art and literary texts with healthcare-related themes such as care, relationships, and the emotional aspects of health was

utilised. Each lesson was designed to provoke reflection on these critical topics, encouraging students to analyse and internalise the broader implications for their future professional roles (Zannini, Bruzzone, 2021; Zannini, Doria, 2018).

One notable example involved the story and film of the 1996 *Mount Everest disaster*, where two expeditions faced life-threatening conditions. Students watched film excerpts and engaged in discussions to examine team dynamics, decision-making under stress, and risk management. This reflection was then tied to similar dynamics in healthcare teams, such as leadership, conflict management, and the responsibilities of both individuals and teams.

The use of visual art further stimulated reflection on relational dynamics. For instance, Van Gogh's *First Steps* and Millet's works were analysed to discuss coordination and interdependence-key elements of collaborative healthcare practice. Literary works like *Il Naso di Moscarda* by Luigi Pirandello encouraged reflective writing. In the final year of the course (2024-2025), a new exam format was introduced where students were required to design their own educational activity based on a case study.

RESULTS

At the end of each course iteration, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire to assess their experience with this teaching approach. Over the years, there has been a growing appreciation for this method, as evidenced by survey results. Still, there was a notable difficulty among students in perceiving art and literature as fundamental tools for professional development, often initially considering them as mere "games" or ways to make the lessons lighter rather than recognizing them as tools that reflect a paradigm shift in healthcare education (Edmonds K, Hammond MF., 2012).

The main finding of these four years of experimentation is that by the final course year, students were more capable of applying non-technical skills in healthcare education. This was evident in the way they embraced the new exam format, with many students opting to integrate artistic and literary methods into their proposed

educational activities, thereby explicitly acknowledging the transformative potential of these tools.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that incorporating humanistic disciplines into medical education enriches students' ability to work in teams, communicate effectively, and approach patient care with empathy. As healthcare environments become increasingly complex, these non-technical skills are critical for improving patient outcomes and fostering more compassionate, ethical practices in healthcare settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the importance of expanding this educational model to other healthcare fields and exploring its long-term impact on professional practice (Dennhardt & al., 2016). Future research should focus on evaluating how these skills directly influence patient care outcomes and team dynamics in diverse healthcare settings, further refining educational strategies to meet the evolving challenges of modern healthcare environments.

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