A Web-based Multimedia Medical Humanities Curriculum

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Web-based teaching tools provide both educators and students a unique learner-centered medium through which to examine virtually any academic subject matter. The medical humanities, explored through different art forms, including visual art, literature, music, and drama, seem an especially well-suited subject for using this teaching modality. Carefully orchestrated Web-based navigation has an unprecedented potential to reveal the complex layering of artistic material, with its personal, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions, and allows the student to experience relationships between the science and the art of medicine. These opportunities inherent in an integrated, modular, multimedia approach have led to the creation of a Web-based medical humanities curriculum at Georgetown University Medical School. Though the curriculum is still under development, it has been piloted in several courses and will be offered as a component of the medical school’s current curricular reform effort.

Curriculum: Structure and Content

The medical humanities curriculum in progress is comprised of eight units, the first two of which are currently Web accessible: (1) the doctor-patient relationship, (2) versions of the body, (3) the experience of illness, (4) mental health, (5) behavioral change, (6) aging, (7) death and dying, and (8) medicine and society. Each unit is explored though a series of curricular exercises involving the interpretation of art, literature, dance, and music, combined with reflective interviews with patients and scholarly commentators. Further, the physical template for the Web site includes links to the “arts library” and “pedagogy.” The latter includes a teacher’s guide, which offers teaching suggestions and course applications, provides clinical links and articles that correlate with the humanities materials, and contains detailed commentaries on selected arts material. While the pedagogy is categorized according to units, the arts library is organized based on art form: poetry, stories and essays, visual art, dance, theatre, and skits. As an integral part of each page throughout the site, these links enable easy access to a large amount of information that can be used by persons completing the exercises in linear fashion as well as those using the Web site for more-specific purposes.

Each unit is divided into sections, which are comprised of one or more relevant exercises. Before the student enters the first section of a unit, there is a short vignette aimed at directing his/her attention to the particular topic being studied. For
instance, the first unit, “The Doctor-Patient Relationship,” has three sections: 1) Why are relationships important? 2) What is the doctor-patient relationship? 3) The effective clinical encounter. At the unit’s opening Web page, a narrative passage provides a description of what it means to be truly alone, devoid of relationships. This is followed by a brief sentence further focusing the student on what will be covered in the following sections and exercises. The student then clicks “next.” The subsequent page instructs him or her to read an Anne Sexton poem (“The Touch”) and view a photograph (“Repetition”) by Kurt Baasch, which are expressions of personal and urban isolation, respectively. Accompanying the photograph are audio comments by students and faculty to which the user can compare his or her own response—this can be done via an electronically submitted written response or in written/journal format.

The section concludes with a passage from a lay psychotherapy text ("A General Theory of Love" by Thomas Lewis et al), and the student is asked to contribute summary thoughts to his or her previous commentary incorporating the new information and explaining why relationships are important, thus answering the question posed in the section’s title.

The user can also proceed in a less linear fashion. For example, in Unit 2, “Versions of the Body,” the student encounters a poem that relies on the language of anatomical detail to celebrate the dynamics of the foot. This poem links to anatomical images, which allows students to compare anatomical descriptions and to reflect on the difference between “poetic” and “clinical” uses of anatomy. Further, a link to Unit 3, “The Experience of Illness” takes the user to a dance vignette representing choreographer Chiao-Ping Li’s accident that destroyed her foot. The dance depicts aspects of her medical or-deal—with the performance countenancing, as it were, her inability to dance—and this in turn links to photographs of her foot after extensive hospitalization and surgery. In this way, students learn to appreciate anatomical function as well as the impact of functional loss, in this instance in the context of an artist’s vocation. These sorts of connections are as important to the learning process as orderly progression through the linear lesson plan.

A Modular Format

The curriculum focuses on the caring aspects of medicine that are not readily reducible to scientific principles; at the same time, it promotes reflections on the relationship between science and art, objectivity and emotion, and demonstrates the importance of navigating seamlessly among these constructs. As previously mentioned, a particular strength of the project is its ability to reinforce such connections, often across segments and units—given the navigational medium in which it is housed—and thus establish itself as a unified curriculum in spite of its modular basis.

At the same time, the curriculum is intended, by virtue of its modular nature, to be maximally adaptable to the varied needs of a broad spectrum of educational projects and programs. A unit may serve as the basis of a longitudinally designed tutorial or a self-contained course. At the other end of the spectrum, a single video segment may enhance a traditional lecture or small-group discussion by driving home a scientific or clinical point.

In a series of pilot projects, specific art works, video segments, or exercises have been adapted to different courses and formats at Georgetown. For example, in one video clip, a physician actor plays a patient who is trying to lose weight (projected for Unit 5, “Behavioral Change”). He talks about the various diets he has tried, as well as his concepts of what it means to lose weight. These clips have been incorporated into a lecture on obesity for the third-year family medicine clerkship.

Similarly, for the introductory lecture to the second semester of our “Introduction to Health Care” course, comprising a multitude of topics ranging from smoking cessation to alternative medicine, video clips relating to these topics are presented to demonstrate a conceptual means of unifying the course. Students are asked what inner, interpersonal, and institutional conflicts the patient portrayed in each video clip faces. One clip is about taking a sexual history, another clip is about a liver transplant patient facing his mortality, another about an aging patient, and yet another about a doctor defending himself in a malpractice suit. Each situation raises the same questions: (1) What is the patient’s problem? and (2) At what level does conflict arise? By reviewing these short video clips in anticipation of the course content, students are taught a structured approach to a range of psychosocial issues.

A poem (“My Father’s Autopsy”) with photographs (Meryl Levin) serves to introduce the Web site’s second unit, “Versions of the Body,” which begins with a discussion on anatomy. This segment has been used in the first-year anatomy class to explore the emotional aspects of working with a cadaver and to illustrate the clash between the scientific and interpersonal dimensions of clinical medicine.

Most recently, 186 first-year students accessed Unit 1 of the Web site (“The Doctor-Patient Relationship”) to compare two theatrical scenes representing pelvic exams, one from the movie “Wit” and the other from a new play by Wendy Wasserstein, “Welcome to my Rash.” They were also asked to choose between one of two other exercises. In the first, they viewed photographs of five sculptures and...
were asked to choose one as their imagined patient and write a creative paragraph about that patient. In the other, they were asked to describe how the composition of a photograph depicting physicians rounding on a hospitalized patient revealed hierarchical relationships. Students were also asked to provide feedback describing their reaction to this experience. Some responses are quoted here:

I think this assignment has a lot of worth and would love to see more things like this. It is a great opportunity to be creative and think about the patient’s perspective. I find this to be a wonderful break from the grind of our science courses!

This exercise was different from others I have done, and it was a nice way to incorporate artistic expression with the practice of medicine. It allowed me to get outside the medical box to observe the physician-patient relationship from a more objective perspective.

I really enjoyed the sculpture exercise. It was an interesting method to allow us to use our imaginations about a single visual stimulus. I like the exercise because the patient couldn’t talk or give us clues about what she was experiencing. We were forced to think through many scenarios and situations to come up with problems that might be affecting the patient, yet she cannot communicate them with us. I think skills such as these will make me a much more caring, concerned, knowledgeable, and aware doctor in the future.

Additional Applications
These applications demonstrate that the Web site need not be compartmentalized into one linear curriculum but that it has readily accessible material that can be applied to a wide variety of educational settings, many of which have not yet been formally explored. For example, an exciting potential for this material is in the area of faculty development. The David Gewanter poem (“My Father’s Autopsy”) could provide rich material for an advanced inquiry into the relationship between the art and the science of medicine. The video segments showing a “difficult” patient—in this case a patient with multiple symptoms that fit no well-defined categories—could stimulate an interesting discussion and possibly even lead to a study to determine what sorts of patients that trainees and physicians find challenging during different phases of professional experience.

The electronic format, coupled with the segmented and linked nature of the curriculum, also offers intriguing opportunities for assessing students both by comparing their responses to different types of exercises and by gauging professional and clinical development over time. The Internet—in some cases interfacing with “Blackboard” for those institutions using it—makes it easy to organize and store student responses as well as provide feedback. (Blackboard is an electronic university-wide bulletin board that allows teachers to post course information and assignments. Students can participate in a discussion and post individual or group e-mails.) Stored responses to specific exercises could become the basis for studies examining relationships between students’ thought processes and future clinical style or their perceptions of dysfunctional doctor-patient relationships and their own practical success communicating with their patients as judged by mentors, patients, and peers.

In summary, the emotional and reflective stimulation of relevant artworks provides necessary insights into the practical, social, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of medicine, none of which is readily accessible through a traditional biomedical curriculum. By navigating this Web-based modular curriculum, students will be given the chance to reflect on the complex nature of medicine and deepen their understanding of the personal and societal challenges they face as future physicians.

Note: The site url is www.georgetown.edu/faculty/wellberc/imh/index.htm. Anyone wanting more information about the site should contact Caroline Wellbery at wellberc@georgetown.edu. The site is copyrighted to Dr. Wellbery, and users should inquire about permission to use posted materials. For artistic material involving established artists, fair use laws apply.

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