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CREATIVE WRITING AND THE MIND/BODY CONNECTION

Teaching Poetry to Med Students? A Conversation with Owen Lewis and Abriana Jetté

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ABSTRACT

A Narrative Medicine curriculum is now generally part of medical education to promote capacities for reflection, observation, engagement, and empathy. The impact of this curriculum is furthered when students are given specific arts training in a limited, but focused, way. This paper details the approach of an intensive poetry reading and craft course embedded in a broader Narrative Medicine curriculum.

Jetté: For over 5 years, you've taught at an intensive poetry workshop for medical students at Columbia Vagelos College of Physicians & Surgeons. Can you explain to us a little bit more what that means?

Lewis: Here's the context. Most medical schools incorporate, to varying degrees, exposure to Narrative Medicine or Medical Humanities early in the curriculum. (Todd C, 2016) This element of curriculum is meant to "humanize" medical education and future clinical care. As the medical interview becomes shorter and the narrative in medical records is replaced with electronic checklists, there is simply less time and opportunity to reflect on the patient's *and* the physician's subjective experiences and the ways these interact. Group reading of literature or observation of, and discussion, has been increasingly used to help students achieve an awareness of this subjective world and how to use it. The intensive workshop in poetry reading and craft is a six week elective in that curriculum. It's an elective, but all students are required to choose one of about a dozen arts seminars.

Jetté: What is the benefit of bringing Literature into the study of medicine?

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Lewis: There is nothing like literature, and to my mind, particularly poetry, for fine-tuning the ear for listening. Physicians should be able to listen to, and "hear" their patients. In addition, the capacities for attention to detail, representation, affiliation, and reflection are considered core skills in the Columbia Vagelos curriculum, and the goals of various programs in narrative medicine are to teach and develop those capacities in all students and to sustain them into clinical practice. (Charon 1995, 2006, 2016; Devlin, 2015; Cunningham, 2018.)

Another important aspect of this curriculum is to allow students' intuitive minds a place. They're all in med school because their logical minds have served them well. They've scored quite successfully on most exams they've ever taken. Literature is not an exam, and an understanding literature proceeds as much through a "hunch" as it does through analysis. Hunches play an important role in diagnosing complicated cases as well as in research discoveries.

Jetté: Is this a common practice in medical schools? What elements of your class are unique?

Lewis: While most medical school incorporate Narrative Medicine into the curriculum, few do it as comprehensively as Columbia/Vagelos with components in all four years. Fewer still have extended the training in Narrative Medicine to include specific training in the craft of an art form. As instructor I organized a short (six week) intensive (three class hours per week) workshop. This intensive training in an expressive art form I believe is unique to Columbia/Vagelos.

Jetté: Can you sketch out the entire program and the rationale?

Lewis: The purpose of the FCM reading discussion, writing, and sharing sequences is to help students confront their own barriers to listening, to empathy and to learning to trust, in a group setting, the intuitive. The rotations during the Major Clinical Year (MCY), during which medical students work on the in-patient units of internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics and the other major clinical departments, each include a writing and reflection session. In the final year, there is a month-long narrative medicine elective that further provides intensive training in creative writing, visual arts, close reading of fiction, music and medicine, and psychological dimensions of doctor-patient relationships. Finally, all fourth-year medical students are required to complete a Scholarly Project, either a clinical/basic science research project or a scholarly or creative thesis. Narrative and Social Medicine is one of the five concentration tracks in which students can accomplish their Projects.

Jetté: How long has this been embedded within the curriculum at Columbia?

Lewis: More than twenty years, though the programs are evolving.

Jetté: And to get granular, what is the purpose of training medical students through the poetic line?

Lewis: I teach poetry as a transcription of the human voice just as musical notation is a transcription of music. Take longer sentence. Read it as prose, then write it breaking that sentence into poetic lines at various places. The emphasis changes as does the emotional meaning. Then practice transcribing someone speaking into the natural line breaks. One begins to hear differently. Health professionals spend far less time than they once did actually listening to their patients. Poetry and attention to the poetic line is a way to jump-start listening. Patients rarely tell their whole story, even if given time. Where is the rest of the story? In a lag, a rush, a change of subject, a hiccup of sound.

Jetté: Tell us more about the arts curriculum?

Lewis: In the second semester of the FCM course, students are required to participate in a Narrative Medicine Seminar. Around 14 concurrent seminars are presented for student selection. Options include fiction-writing, creative non-fiction, comic book writing, play-writing, museum observation, photography, the language of choreography and dance, and, of course, poetry. The goal is to further enhance, in a focused way, the students' capacities to observe, reflect, and to express their subjective worlds. It is further hoped that the students might gain tools that carry forward which will allow them to process the complex experiences of becoming a physician and practicing medicine. The teachers of these seminars are, with few exceptions, scholars holding the terminal degree in their fields and artists professionally recognized in their discipline. The expectation is not to make the medical student into an artist, although some students, through the course, do begin to conceptualize ways to integrate art into their future practice of medicine.

Jetté: And when you teach the course, your focus is on poetry?

Lewis: Oh yes!

Jetté: Is there a particular structure you keep to your course curriculum?

Lewis: In order to optimize the six-week experience, to leave students with a feeling that something important has happened to them and with them, every session must intensively contribute. Logistically, every session includes the deep reading and group discussion of three or four poems from a "reading packet" that is distributed in advance of each class. Starting with the second class, a "writing packet" of the students' writing is also distributed. Several of these poems are workshopped each week. If a student's poem has not been workshopped, I will give written feedback that week. For the final session, I assemble an "anthology" of several of each student's poems and well as the required "final reflection."

Jetté: Do the readings vary from class to class, or do you have a standard set of poems you offer to students?

Lewis: Guided by the belief that deep reading makes for good writing, each class is divided between a reading of established writers and the workshopping of student writing. A packet of about a dozen poems is circulated before each class. Each week I create a new reading packet based on my intuitive sense of what will move the students and that allows for discussion of the essential elements of craft. The discussion of craft elements are directly tied to the emotional content and themes of the poem. They serve an expressive purpose. The freshness and spontaneity of the creation of this weekly reading list leads to a fresh and spontaneous teaching approach. Rather than teach "my" curriculum, I try to find the right curriculum for the class I am currently teaching.

Jetté: So, it's like instead of teaching the students how to dissect a cadaver, you're teaching them how to dissect a poem?

Lewis: Yes, in a sense. But there's life after death in the dissection of a poem. It's not for the academic purpose of teaching meter or stanza, but to allow the emotional meaning of the poem to live and to figure out how.The craft element must include: approaches to heighten expressive language, the differences between lyric and narrative organization, the concept of the line and the use of line-break, the concept of stanza and the use of stanza break, rhythm, rhyme, enjambment, pacing, metaphor, simile, confessional approaches, symbolist approaches, and many others. These basic elements of contemporary poetry must be introduced, ~~but~~ not as academic constructs, but as tools that aid expression.

Jetté: What does a typical first class look like?

Lewis: Where to begin? One of the problems I first confront is how to choose the optimal starting point for a given class. In a semester-long course, a class or two can be given over to this assessment. In a six-week course, no class can be wasted. This challenge is heightened in the teaching of poetic craft to medical students who approach the workshop with an extremely wide variety of past experiences. One recent class was comprised of students who had been writing for most of their lives, some of whom had had creative writing courses, one of whom who had even completed a masters degree in Narrative Medicine. Another class was comprised of students who were interested in poetry but hadn't read or written much at all.

Jetté: That sounds like an interesting variety of students. How do you manage all of the different learning styles?

Lewis: To solve this issue, I ask the students to send me in advance of the first class a poem that they have found to be particularly meaningful. The first packet consists of these poems, plus one of the instructor's. Unlike subsequent classes, there is no workshop component to the first class, and all of the poems will be read. The submission of these poems immediately gives the student a "voice"

in the class and serves to more personally introduce the student to the class. The students generally have given thought to the choice and bring to the first class something importahnt about themselves. This sets a particular emotional tone for the class. It is not the usual superficial introduction by demographics, but rather a witnessing of what can learned about one another (and hence oneself) through the language of poetry.

Jetté: Are there particular poets or poems that seem to always make the list?

Lewis: One year, for instance, Charles Bukowski unlocked the class—his irreverent and "unpretty" themes and seemingly scrappy style. The next year, I asked in advance if anyone had any particular "poetic allergies." Bukowski was the only allergy mentioned!

Jetté: Can you talk to me about how the students will share this first poem with one another?

Lewis: I organize these first poems into a reading packet and distribute in advance and they form the reading of the first class. Their choices, as I've said, cue me into how sophisticated their reading is. A second important aspect of this first class introduces the student to the power and magic of close reading in a group setting. The student will have presented a poem well known to them, one they feel some command of. Yet as the class contributes, and the meaning of the poem accrues, the student will discover something about the poem not previously known. It is eye-opening for almost every student. If the class—and *class* means not the instructor alone but the group process of the class—can give respectful new insights into a poem held dear by the student, an important first step has been taken in trusting that the class can give equally important insights into the student's own writing.

Jetté: As students are discussing the poems, is there something specific you are looking out for?

Lewis: I am watching for the class's "high-tide." Which poems, or verses, or lines are the portals to the most animated discussions? This serves as a guide to the next week's reading and to the first assignment. I also learn from the first class whether the students are involved with their own on-going writing, or not. If not, they will need help to get going with their own writing. For the first group I taught, most were not already involved in writing, so the notion of writing a poem meant verse with meter, rhyme, or both, and it stymied them. Several of the poems offered pre-first class by the first group contained conversations between family members. Rather than asking the group to write a poem for the following week, I asked them to write an intense, real or imagined, conversation. Over the next two weeks, more elaborated stories about these conversations were added and edited until the "live" language in their writing was discovered, and out of these conversations, poems emerged. The second group, already at home in poetic language, did not need a specific assignment.

Jetté: You'd never get away with such a curriculum in most academic settings where reading lists must be approved in advance.

Lewis: I understand the need for deans and students to know in advance what they're getting into, but this approach, which I've called "The Responsive Curriculum" serves a different function. In a six-session workshop, each session must be intense and touch the student emotionally. To create such intensity, I find I listen with a "third ear" to follow the tides of the class's responsiveness, what I have intuited about them, and then choose the next week's reading packet primarily from what I "sense" about them, not from poems that will illustrate craft points I wish to stress. While I do have a craft-driven curriculum in mind, I teach this from a set of poems chosen intuitively.

Within two or three days after each class, I circulate this reading packet of about twelve poems for the subsequent class. Then, within a day or two of the next class, a writing packet of the students' writing that week is also circulated. The expectation is that students will read the entire packet, and choose one or two poems for discussion. In a sense, the reading packet is both an answer to what the instructor had heard and sensed in the prior class but also a question. What in the new packet elicits the strongest responses, negative or positive? Who has chosen what? And how are student responses to the reading packet correlating with the writing they offer?

All twelve poems can never be discussed, nor can any one poem be fully discussed. I do not aim to read and discuss them all. Rather, the point of the readings is not only to present the students examples of well crafted poetry, but to fill them with new voices that will rattle voices within them that have not yet found expression. Students need to be surprised by their own writing, but even more importantly, by their reading. The format of the workshop ties close and surprised reading, deliberately too much to intellectually assimilate, with surprises in writing by this over-stimulation of the unconscious. I learned this from the poet Fran Quinn. (McCarthy BE and Quinn F, 2013)

As noted, the reading packet serves a dual function: to give well-crafted examples for the instructor to illustrate elements of craft such as line-break, enjambment, stanzaic structure, fast and slow lines, levels of diction, narrative versus lyric structures, to name a few. These are the "A, B, C's" of contemporary poetry. What is highlighted here is that the reading packet must not only serve as a platform for these craft discussions, but attempt to address where the student is in relation to accessing the student's own voice. Maintaining a class of heightened discovery is paramount.

As I mentioned previously, the poetry of Charles Bukowski served as an important pivot for one class. I could not have known this in advance. One student offered a Bukowski poem initially, and it ignited the class. Bukowski, with his short lines, often rambling form, his rough, sometimes drunken, sometimes sloppy subject matter and expression, was the antidote to the class's prior belief that poetry need be rhymed and metered. Bukowski gave them permission to write about matters

previously considered “unpoetic.” And yet, his poems contain enough of a narrative so that student anxiety about not understanding the poems was not heightened. Had I arranged in advance six week’s worth of reading packets I probably would not have included Bukowski, yet seeing the way this poet energized the imaginations of the students, a Bukowski poem was included in each of the subsequent reading packets for this particular class.

Banking on success with Bukowski, I misjudged the next year’s class, the one with the student “allergic” to Bukowski. They all thought him crude and sophomoric. This class was more comfortable with poetry that made mysterious emotional and imaginative leaps. In a discussion of the role and need (or lack of role) for a narrative structure, this group gravitated to Laura Kasischke, for instance, whose poetry became more of a staple of the packets, and to Lee-Young Li. In a discussion of narrative, lyric, and sublime elements, one student in the second class coined the phrase “deliberate vagueness” (Diana Flanagan, Vagelos School of Medicine class of 2021). This phrase took on special significance in the class igniting intellectual and emotional energy in much the same way as a Bukowski poem did in the first class.

There are many unexpected opportunities to capture spontaneity in the curriculum. For instance, I had included a poem in translation by a German poet, Reiner Kunze, in one of the packets. One of the students, it turns out, was a fluent German speaker and quickly found the original on-line. She read it, to the delight of the class, and offered several mistranslated nuances from the German. Taking a cue, I then included in the following week’s reading packet poems both in the original and in translation in languages I knew were represented in the class including German, Spanish, Italian, and Hebrew. An animated discussion ensued on translation, the “voice” of a language, and the approximations of all language.

Jetté: Is there any poetry that you particularly avoid?

Lewis: Surprising, “medical” poetry has proved to be less meaningful than anticipated. When I’ve included medically themed poems in the reading packets, I find that by and large these are not regularly accessed by the students. I believe that for this group, in the second semester, these topics overwhelm them with the sense of coming responsibilities. Poetry about being medical students, on the other hand, captures the tentativeness of entering the clinical domain. When I’ve taught reading electives to students further along in their medical training, the medically themes poems elicit more robust responses.

Jetté: Turning to the actual working of student writing, any do’s or don’t’s?

Lewis: I work very hard to help the students advance their capacities to write a poem. It doesn’t matter what the starting point is, I want them to have the pleasure at seeing their technical skills

grow. To this end, every student gets feedback every week, whether through the class or by my written feedback since all poems can't be workshopped each week.

I've developed an approach I call "Guided Workshopping". The guiding principle of the workshop component of the class is that that the student should find some success in each attempt at revision, and the goal is to leave the students with new writing tools and great confidence that the student can represent experience in poetry. In a six-session course, there isn't time to waste. I want~~ed~~ the students to experience new capacities in their writing, so I took a more active role in the rewriting, both in class and in my weekly communications. Having a state-of-the-art classroom where suggestions can be immediately shown via a smart-board facilitates this approach. If the class is held via Zoom, the "share screen" option also allows for this. If line-breaks are the issue, the class can react to a poem on the screen with an alternative, then another, and yet another. The results are immediate.

To better explain the "directed" workshop approach, I offer an analogy from a painting class: if a particular prominent curve in a painting is wrong, the instructor can talk at length about the curve, or the instructor can demonstrate. Talking about the suggestion or teaching via demonstration? The demonstration is often more impactful. Once students have experienced the powerful expansion of meaning achieved via group reading, they similarly learn to accept, or at the least to play with, both my suggestions and those of the group.

Once I see that students are both open to suggestions and have had some success in rewriting, I turn more of the feedback over to the class. They're quick learners.

Jetté: What do you expect of your students in terms of writing output?

Lewis: While writing is expected from the student each week, a revision is considered as fulfilling this requirement. ~~If even~~ Even with one poem, they learn that the real poem most often comes into being through work and through developing craft. This is one of the most important messages to carry forward. The process of inspiration about a deeply felt topic, learning technique, employing these learned approaches with outside, objective feedback leading to a refined expression—this can apply to any endeavor. What makes this process even more compelling are the discoveries the students make about themselves. To be open with oneself, and surprised by oneself, leads to an openness with the world.

Jetté: Anything special your students get from the workshop format?

Lewis: Regular students of creative writing are used to this format. Medical students—the opposite. It builds trust, collegiality, and a chance to know one another in a very different way.

And in addition, they get comfortable with a format in which ambiguity is usual. This is very, very important for anyone working with people.

Jetté: You told us in detail about the first class. Anything about the last class you'd like to add.

Lewis: For the final class I collate their writing in an "anthology" and include a reflection they are asked to write about their experiences in the course. This serves to crystalize what they have learned and to generalize the lessons. The anthology is a symbolic representation saying that the students have created something meaningful and the group celebrates the victories of voice!

The reflections, too, are meaningful, and even though connections between poetry and medicine are not stressed in the workshop, the reflections often tie the process of reading and writing poetry back to their chosen profession of medicine. The title of this article is taken from a student's reflection (Bert Vancura, Vagelos School of Medicine, class of 2020) which concludes:

Throughout the course, I often thought that many of the powerful moments of medicine can be articulated very well through poetry. These moments can sometimes be overlooked or normalized in the daily practice of medicine, but poetry can bring them to life. In addition, I often drew parallels between poetry and science. Both disciplines are a form of creative expression, and both try to make sense of our world. Throughout these sessions, I saw that great poetry does not require extraordinary events to motivate it. Rather, poetry happens around us all the time and the best poems often tap into this, giving meaning to the ordinary or making us reconsider it in a new way. Similarly, I think that the best science seeks to illuminate the ordinary and allows us the see the same world in a constantly-changing way.

In response to my note requesting permission to quote his essay~~, in his reply~~ he wrote:

I haven't been able to keep up with any formal writing, but I have found myself stopping to appreciate moments from everyday life that would make for poetry, and even that has been enjoyable.

And that, ultimately is the point of investing student time and school resources in an arts workshop within a medical school curriculum—to shape sensibility to allow for such reflection in the midst of the otherwise hectic life the medical profession demands and to remain responsive to their patients and the world.

Jetté: Thank you so much for talking with us. Let's hope you're training some fine poet doctors. And it occurs to me that your curriculum has applicability beyond med school. Have you thought about that?

Lewis: Thank you for asking that. Creative writing is taught in lots of settings outside of MFA programs. Not only are writing courses taught in lots of community centers for a general public, but in work that involves human services where emotion stress is high, reading, writing, and reflection are excellent ways to process that stress. My “method”, if you will, involves 1) the specialized intro class as described, 2) the “responsive curriculum”, 3) directed, as well as open, workshopping, and finally 4) a “celebratory anthology” that includes a reflection by each student on writing itself. Thank you again for your interest.

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