Practicing what we Preach: Teaching Compassion through Experiences in the Humanities

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Abstract

Engagement with the humanities offers an opportunity to hone skills of compassion. Through two workshops, we created space for medical students to engage with art works in the community. Together we practiced accepting silence, tolerating ambiguity, opening to different perspectives, and humility.

Introduction

Medical school provides an ideal time and culture for developing future physicians’ capacities to tolerate ambiguity, reflect on, and respond to discomfort. It is also a time when self-reflection, mindfulness, and compassion can be modeled to students by their mentors and learned through peer collaboration.

Art is a medium which can be used to encourage reflection among medical students in a way that is accessible. We came up with 4 key facets of compassion which we strived to practice through engagement with the humanities with our colleagues.

Methods

As 2016-2017 Rodis Fellows, we facilitated the following workshops for first year Geisel students:
• Close looking exercise at the Hood Museum’s 2016 photography exhibit. Followed by conversations and creative writing on compassionate care with Drs. Joe O’Donnell and Stephen Plume
• Narrative Medicine workshop and reflection on Charles Bukowski’s poem “Bluebird”. Followed by discussion around self-care in medicine and compassionate care for others.

Outcomes

• Engagement with the humanities provided a means to indirectly practice skills that contribute to compassionate care.
• Students were challenged and moved to use the humanities as a springboard for deeper conversations about compassion and medicine.
• Students reported feeling calm, aware, at peace, inspired, and introspective at the end of the workshops.
• We successfully collaborated with people in our surrounding communities who share an interest in the humanities.

Themes

• Center self and reflect through engagement with the humanities
• Peer to peer learning and teaching
• Cultivate a sense of wonder and awe
• No “Right Answer”
• Celebrate diversity of backgrounds and interpretations of artwork
• Develop trust to share and offer vulnerability
• Use the humanities as a springboard and medium to celebrate and develop compassion for ourselves, our colleagues, and our patients

With Appreciation

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