



THE ARTS ISSUE

HOW THE BU ARTS OUTREACH INITIATIVE IS CREATING A NEW WAY TO THINK ABOUT STUDENTS, PATIENTS & MEDICINE.

BY MARY HOPKINS

PhD student Alexandra Wink (MED'11, '18) performs with fellow musicians and medical students Al Nadjarian (MED'17) (seated front), Bobby Carey (MED'13, '17) (left back), and David Park (MED'17).
Photo by Michael D. Spencer

Moisès Fernández Via once volunteered in the pediatric oncology department of a local hospital in his hometown of Barcelona, Spain, where the now world-renowned concert pianist says he learned about life and the power of the arts. After a young patient asked him to “make music,” he envisioned bringing a performing arts program to the hospital and ultimately established the first-ever such program in a Spanish medical facility. He extended his vision to Boston University, where he has piloted the BU Arts Outreach Initiative, a collaboration between the BU Medical Campus (BUMC) and the College of Fine Arts (CFA). “My endeavor at BU is a continuation of the work I started in Barcelona a decade ago—a way to continue following that request to make music,” he says.

Fernández Via, the initiative’s project curator and researcher, sees Boston University as a unique environment for an arts outreach program. “Under the umbrella of a prestigious research university, BU is home to a first-class medical education institution, an affiliated teaching hospital with one of the most rich and diverse populations, and a conservatory arts college with the oldest degree-granting music program in the United States,” he says. “The Arts Outreach Initiative aims to articulate an innovative dialogue among these three realities that coexist at BU. Our goal is to nurture cross-disciplinary collaborations, edifying an avenue for creativity for qualitative expressive outlets and celebration among our Medical Campus community.”

As designed, the program builds relationships between artistic creativity and health care practice. “Medicine and the arts have in common their committed dedication to life,” notes Fernández Via. “Both possess an endless curiosity about the human condition and its challenges; both aim to care, nurture, and transform at some level. A dialogue between medicine and the arts seems to me a conversation between two perspectives observing the same object. A productive relationship between the two means a two-way endeavor that mutually benefits each other.”

Through the Arts Initiative, CFA students come to the Medical Campus to share their artistic gifts with students, faculty, staff, and patients. In turn, Medical Campus students, faculty, staff, and patients are given opportunities to display their artistic talents and learn from their CFA counterparts. The arts play a role in the early intellectual and personal education of many medical students. This program supports the presence of creativity in their medical training, encouraging them to embrace both art and medicine without having to choose between them.

During the 2013–2014 academic year, the program offered 59 arts-related activities including campus and hospital musical performances, theater projects, life-study drawing sessions, and musical flashmobs. The program also fostered the School of Public

Health Student’s Art Society, inter-school art projects including a dance flashmob, and a National Public Health Week music video. Collaboration between patients of the BMC/BUSM Department of Neurology and the BU Jazz Combo and BUSM faculty dedicated a performance to the physicians and hospital staff who cared for the patients involved. Also, study break concerts are arranged for Medical Campus students.

Waiting is a central part of the hospital experience. It can heighten anxiety and in some cases, exhaustion. In BMC’s Cancer Center, students from the BU Theater Department read poetry and stories to chemotherapy patients to help pass the long and sometimes empty waiting periods they must tolerate. During these times, staff members report that patients request staff attention less frequently, which helps with the workflow on the unit. In waiting areas throughout the hospital, Arts Initiative students singly and in groups perform the finest of classical music, thereby turning these spaces into concert halls.

Some Arts Initiative projects address specific issues in delivering health care. “Silence,” a project implemented in a surgical unit at BMC, utilizes curated musical performances by students. The unit aims to both heighten the awareness of and reduce the noise level in their area.

“Not only for the patients, but for the nurses and other health care teams, [music] provides an overall comfort on the floor. Whenever the music starts, the levels of noise get reduced, it gets quieter and quieter, and you can feel it . . . it almost becomes spiritual,” wrote the unit nurse manager.

Musical performances also occur in hallways adjacent to where patients are recovering from surgery, followed by performances in individual patient rooms. Understanding that many victims of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing were cared for on the Medical Campus, the program on the one-year anniversary of that event included Medical and Charles River Campus students and BUMC faculty and staff performing an impromptu concert to commemorate the tragedy.

Fourth-year medical student Harin Patel explains that his involvement in the Arts Initiative meshes with his interest in narrative medicine. “Narrative medicine is the clinical practice of listening to patients’ stories and using the patient-doctor interaction as the foundation of the entire clinical encounter,” he says. “I think that participating in artistic endeavors—whether acting in or watching a play, writing or reading literature, singing, dancing, or something else entirely—is a critical aspect of being able to practice narrative medicine. If in the future, I am fortunate enough to practice at an academic medical center, I hope I will be able to use my experiences with the Arts Initiative in promoting creative expression in those around me. You don’t need to be an artist to be affected by art.”

“These artistic activities create an impact far beyond the originally planned goals, educating staff and patients alike in artistic forms generally inaccessible to them, restoring a general sense of dignity, or simply promoting environments suitable for recovery,” says Fernández Via.

Having consolidated the pilot phase of the Arts Initiative, his future plans include potential collaboration with the medical residency program and BMC’s Witness to Violence program, among others. “We could say that the awareness phase is accomplished,” he says. “Now we hope that the campus sees us as a reliable partner to team up with to envision and utilize creativity to continue transforming the campus’ vibrant human and intellectual capital.” ■



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VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES: BUILDING COMMUNICATION AND TEAMWORK

WHILE MEDICAL CARE IS COMPLEX and delivered in teams, it is often framed by individual practitioners. More than 60 percent of medical errors are due to poor communication. Also, research indicates a strong relationship between a health care team’s communication skills and a patient’s adherence to medical recommendations and adaptation of healthy lifestyles.

In order to train medical students to be active, effective communicators who observe and listen well, Suzanne Sarfaty, MD (MED’88), assistant dean for academic affairs and enrichment, piloted a Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) program in the ambulatory medicine fourth-year clerkship.

“Developing and reinforcing critical thinking skills as well as instilling a strong capacity for teamwork are essential goals of the medical education at BUSM,” says Sarfaty. “VTS, by using facilitated discussion of art work, builds skills in observation, listening, and communication that enhance critical thinking and support effective team building.”

The program is now in its second year at BUSM. Students view and discuss works of visual art with a group of their peers, focusing on identifying characteristics of a highly functioning team. They work collaboratively to maintain a climate of mutual respect, listen carefully, and encourage ideas and opinions of other team members. Students explore working within a team to probe ambiguity,

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integrate viewpoints of all team members, and recognize the benefit of teamwork in organizing, managing, and completing complex tasks. They also examine conflict within a team or with challenging patients.

“A major goal in my life is to find art in medicine, so naturally Visual Thinking Strategies applied to medical education was immediately of interest to me,” says third-year medical student Tripp Leavitt, course manager for the Visual Education in Medicine elective. “Before medical school, I found myself reading about the importance of observation and history taking from Drs. Lisa Sanders and Jerome Groopman. When I first stepped onto the floors as a first-year medical student, I found the skills of observation developed in the art studio and in museums coalescing with what I’d read, and I wanted to provide other students with more insight into active looking in clinic.”



Through the elective, Leavitt found that students became better active observers and came to understand the difference between observation and inference by looking closer at images and artwork, deducing what might be happening, and then backing up their opinions.

“This kind of observation also involves an internal processing of visual information,” says Leavitt. “The first step of any patient encounter is observation. The amount of information that can be gleaned from the subtlest of clues can be immense. What is the patient’s posture like? Why are the blinds down? Is the patient obese or is what appears to be fat distributed in an irregular or pathological way? Enhancing observational skills is useful to both clinicians and artists, and can be achieved through the practice of drawing. VTS also works to enhance communication and collegiality among co-workers, both of which are core to good patient care in today’s team-based medicine.”

“It is fascinating to participate in the evolution of a story the students create about the artwork they are viewing, building on each other’s thoughts,” says Sarfaty. “They practice respectful dialogue, express differences in opinion, and learn how to speak up. We explore conflict resolution strategies. These are skills that can be used in the high stakes environment of clinical medicine but practiced in the low stakes environment of a classroom with peers.”

VTS training also is included in a first-year elective, Visual Education in Medicine. The departments of Medicine and Surgery have held VTS training sessions for their faculty, and the BU Goldman School of Dental Medicine has implemented it for their first-year dental classes and included a VTS segment in a faculty development workshop. While Sarfaty is writing a grant proposal to expand the program, she is working with the new physician assistant (PA) program to offer VTS to PA students. ■