

JLTA OPERA ARTICLE (“Diseases, Opera, and Divas”) REVIEW Johanna Shapiro

Topic's Significance

This article describes an innovative use of opera in an elective class for preclinical medical students as a way of focusing on the physician-patient relationship and stigmatizing dimensions of certain illnesses. As such it is highly relevant to the integration of the arts into medical education.

Theoretical Framework: Review of literature provides a clear framework for interpreting/analyzing/describing the project.

This goal is partially fulfilled. The authors do a good job of situating their curricular project within the theoretical literature on reflective writing, and this provides a reasonable theoretical framework for their work. However, a shortcoming of the article is that it treats opera purely as text, and provides no theoretical basis for understanding opera as performance and how this might affect learners and influence outcomes. I would like to see this report situated within a larger literature examining the relationship of performative arts to medical education.

Research Design and Methods

This is a descriptive study. The Methods for developing and assessing the class are thoroughly described and, in fact, are quite impressive. Post-class evaluation data were collected and reported. Final projects were evaluated according to the REFLECT rubric, and these qualitative results are (somewhat minimally) reported. I recommend that the authors provide a table showing the distribution of various levels of reflection in the students' essays, as this seemed to be one of the goals of the project.

I would imagine that IRB approval was not necessary because this was essentially an educational experience, rather than a research investigation.

Table 2 is very long and somewhat tedious. It does contain useful information for anyone trying to replicate the course, but perhaps it could be relegated to an appendix.

Interpretation/Analysis/Description

There is some material in Results which in my mind better belongs in Methods. I found the Discussion somewhat redundant with the Results section. The Discussion should be used to extend, rather than simply summarize, the results.

I'd like to see more attention paid in the Discussion to the musical dimension and to the “style” of the operatic medium (i.e., plots and characters rather overdrawn, melodramatic). This is a chance for authors to comment on what unique contributions opera can make to medical education compared to other humanities/arts-based education. The musical conventions of opera are not to everyone's taste. Did students embrace these? How did the musical element interact with their thoughts about doctor-patient relationship and/or stigma? Similarly, how did the melodramatic quality of opera affect students? Did it crystallize issues for them? Did it enhance or interfere with their experience?

Overall, I would like to see more interpretation of results. Apparently, the worst-received modules had to do with pain, suffering, and mortality. What are the authors' thoughts as to why this might be – quality of instructors?; nature of subject matter? This would be important for future attempts at replication. Students wrote primarily about the doctor-patient relationship, although they also had the option of writing about stigma in illness. Do the authors have any ideas about why this choice was favored over the others? In another instance, students suggested a more varied aesthetic menu for the course, incorporating visual and

literary arts. What was the thinking behind this suggestion? Was an exclusive diet of arias and recitatives wearing on students? On a broader scale, as above, what did the authors identify as the unique elements of opera? Suppose students had gone to see plays about AIDS, TB, doctors and patients? Would this have produced the same results?

Organization/Quality of Writing/Presentation

The writing is clear, complete, and easy to follow. The paper is well-organized.

Contributions to the Field/Appropriateness and Overall Interest for this Audience

There are differences of opinion in the field of medical education as to whether single institution evaluative educational intervention studies with only post-class evaluation data should continue to be reported. My personal feeling is that, since medical (or health) humanities is still in the phase of making forays into medical education, such reports have merit, especially when exploring a little used modality such as opera. However, as above, I wish the authors would reflect more on “why opera”? Does it contribute something unique, or is it just a novelty? Does the nature of opera itself pose any downsides or barriers that other humanities/arts modalities do not? I think with a more thoughtful discussion of such issues this article is worthy of publication.