Life Drawing and the Art of Anatomical Education

Abstract

The human body is a piece of art. Therefore it is reasonable to suggest that an effective method of learning anatomy is through artistic means. As well as a method to education, art can also be a form of therapy and escape from the stresses of learning. Taking the outlet of life drawing, by enrolling classes and hosting a life drawing event through Barts and the London Medical Humanities society I will be able to draw on my own experiences as well as the experiences of others in order to create a poster that determines the value of art in medical education as well as its potential therapeutic impact. In the process I would also like to understand how it feels to draw the model and the impact of this particular social interaction on the drawer: will this help medical students in future interact with potentially vulnerable patients and still remain professional? A 2006 paper titled “The Use of Creative Projects in Gross Anatomy Class” reported on the “use of optional creative projects to promote reflection and reduce stress” (Shapiro, 2006). I argue that anatomy would be more enjoyable and potentially easier to learn if students were given a broader range of educational outlets in order to learn anatomy. Life drawing is just one means of achieving this.

The “Experiment”...

In an article in the Student BMJ about life drawing for medical students, it suggests there may be value in exposing pre-clinical medical students to situations they may not necessarily find themselves in as “we are faced with an array of bodies at various stages of ageing, obesity and decrepitude” whilst in our clinical years (Price-Kuehne, 2010). Consequently, immunising oneself with the vast range of the human body early on in our studies may help us later on in our careers, in terms of anatomy as well as patient contact and respect. In order to put this theory to the test as part of Barts and the London Medical Humanities organisation, I organised a life drawing event for medical students. This was done in collaboration with an outside company of artists called ‘Nude for Thought’. Although the majority of the students were from Barts, we had students from Kings as well as Imperial medical schools as well, thus illustrating the widening interest in the value of medical humanities in the practice of clinical medicine.

As the male model carefully de-robed you could feel a sort of tension lift from the air: the human body we had all readied our charcoal and paper for, was exposed. Having participated in a couple of life drawing classes previously I was more able to appreciate the reactions of the students around me. Some had come up to me beforehand just to clarify that the model would “actually be naked”? Others did not seemed phased at all. And why should they be? Practically every day of our clinical lives will be spent with the human body in all its wonderful complexities and shapes and forms.

What struck me the most was the almost instantaneous calm and focus that fell over the room. Everyone, without exception was focused on the task. Soothing music in the background, we all let the pencil flow and our picture form on the page. While the model, statue in persona, formed different positions for us to draw him in, the instructors came around the group, giving tips, encouraging us. This made the whole experience that much more relaxed and enjoyable: you were not being judged and more importantly you were not being tested. The knowledge you were acquiring was not necessarily anatomical but perhaps a state of being: a way to react to the human body and respect it.

Whilst the aim of this session was to introduce students to a different way of viewing the human body, outside of a medical perspective, it seems to have also done a lot more. Some had come up to me beforehand just to clarify that the model would “actually be naked”? Others did not seemed phased at all. And why should they be? Practically every day of our clinical lives will be spent with the human body in all its wonderful complexities and shapes and forms.

In no way am I suggesting that anatomical education should be replaced solely by life drawing or other artistic means, (you cannot get by on a model and charcoal alone!). However what I do suggest is that medical education and in this case anatomical education need not always have the focus of passing exams. Taking a holistic approach can open up doors to different schools of thought and may even make you remember why you fell in love with the mystery and science of the human body and medicine itself, in the first place.

References & Acknowledgements


Anhya Griffiths
Student Poster
ha13240@gmail.com
Barts and the London school of medicine and dentistry

What the students thought...

To appreciate the reaction and ideas of the students from the life drawing event I produced a questionnaire to which 11 out of 16 students responded. The questionnaire was based on “yes or no” answers or based on a scoring system of 1-5, with 1=not at all and 5=very good. Below is a table to illustrate some of the questions and the mean responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Score/Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Would you like to see similar events like this held again?”</td>
<td>Yes (unanimous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Do you think holistic sessions like this can be useful in the study of medicine?”</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Would sessions like this be a good optional addition to the medical curriculum?”</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Do you think sessions like this have any therapeutic/relaxing benefits?”</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other comments from the students...

“Provokes thoughts about anatomy in a way that purely observing textbook images cannot”

“It was illuminating to consider the body as a piece of art as well as a finely tuned scientific machine”

“Reduced my stress immediately, I focused purely on the task at hand.”

In conclusion...

As so articulately expressed in an article in the Medical Humanities journal, “the clue to understanding the role of the humanities lies in the argument that the work of art makes explicit our otherwise taken for granted self understanding”, (Edgar, A. 2006). Life drawing is a perfect example of understanding self and humanising the seemingly dogmatic ritual of learning anatomy. So many students after the life drawing session came up to me and expressed how nice it was to look at and appreciate the human body from a “different perspective”. A perspective that does not rely on exam style questions and exact medical knowledge; but one that relies on your own self and the appreciation that our bodies are more than mere vehicles for our academic minds. They are pieces of art.

I hope to be able to document my findings in the form of a poster, which can be used on the task. Soothing music in the background, we all let the pencil flow and our picture form on the page. While the model, statue in persona, formed different positions for us to draw him in, the instructors came around the group, giving tips, encouraging us. This made the whole experience that much more relaxed and enjoyable: you were not being judged and more importantly you were not being tested. The knowledge you were acquiring was not necessarily anatomical but perhaps a state of being: a way to react to the human body and respect it.

References & Acknowledgements

Edgar, A. P., 2006, Need humanities be so serious? Justifying the place and role of humanities as a critical resource for performance and practice, Medical Humanities, v. 32, p. 32-98 .