

## **Teaching Medical Humanities Through Film Discussions**

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*ABSTRACT:* Following a brief consideration of two contrasting purposes for teaching the medical humanities, a description is given of a film discussion elective course. In contrast to the usual teaching of medical ethics which is primarily a cognitive activity emphasizing the development of a code of principles such as justice, autonomy, and beneficence, the film discussion elective was primarily an affective activity emphasizing the development of an ethical ideal of caring, relatedness, and sensitivity to others. The pass/fail elective, offered for one credit each quarter for two quarters, met once a week for one hour for twenty-four weeks. Each week a film was shown followed by a group discussion. A wide variety of social issues were covered. The objective of the course was to increase the ethical sensitivity of the medical students through promotion of introspection and reflection on social issues. A brief discussion is given of the importance and appropriateness of using film to promote the affective focus of medicine on the relief of suffering. Examples are given of how the course achieved its objective. A detailed description of the resource materials is provided.

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Figure 1



## INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been considerable growth in the teaching of the medical humanities which has been well documented for both preclinical and clinical medical education.<sup>1-5</sup> Most of the teaching of the medical humanities has been in medical ethics although increasingly attention is being given now to history, literature, art, religion, and so forth. But whenever any of the medical humanities are being taught it is to accomplish one of two ultimate purposes: (1) To develop a code of principles such as justice, autonomy, benevolence, equality, honesty, and so forth to guide one's moral choices and behavior or (2) To develop an ethical ideal of caring, relatedness, sensitivity, compassion, refraining from harm, and so forth to guide one's moral choices and behavior. That is, fundamentally the purpose of the medical humanities is to influence moral behavior. The question is how best to do that. In contrasting these two approaches then one might ask whether the purpose of teaching medical humanities is to make better rule followers or to make better people—not that the two are necessarily mutually exclusive. But is the endeavor primarily duty based or virtue based, especially in those instances where one has to be sacrificed for the other. John Stuart Mill seemed to endorse the latter in his inaugural address when he said, "Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians . . . and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians."<sup>6</sup> Much of the teaching of *medical ethics* has been in the former camp which is primarily a cognitive activity while much of the teaching of the *other medical humanities* has been in the latter camp which is primarily an affective activity. In the

literature of moral development this former approach of developing and following principles, especially justice, has been associated, by some, primarily with male thinking about morality and frequently linked to the work of Kohlberg.<sup>7-9</sup> Similarly in the literature of moral development this latter approach of attention to care and relationships has been associated primarily with female thinking about morality and linked to the work of Gilligan and Noddings.<sup>10-11</sup> Of course, both approaches are important and needed and, fortunately, not mutually exclusive. But it does raise the interesting and problematic question of whether adhering to a code of principles might sometimes violate the ethical ideal of caring, relatedness, and refraining from harm, and/or whether adhering to the ethical ideal of caring might sometimes violate the principles of justice, autonomy, honesty, and so forth. Much more needs to be said about this, but briefly the answer is—yes! So while the two approaches are generally compatible, when pushed on occasion one does have to choose between the two regarding which one will determine a given moral choice. Although there seems to be some legitimacy to the distinction between the two approaches, it has been unnecessary, unhelpful, and unfortunate to have them categorized and associated with male vs. female types of thinking. The polarization resulting from such a simple dichotomy has diverted much effort, time and energy from the serious conceptual analysis of the important central issue of whether morality is best understood as a principled, duty based activity or a caring, relationship activity.

This report describes an elective course in medical humanities which pursued the approach of teaching an ethical ideal of caring through weekly film discussions.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE**

The course was a pass/fail elective course offered for one credit per quarter during the fall and winter quarters of the academic year. It was conducted in an informal atmosphere as a brown bag noon-time lunch discussion. It was open to first and second year medical students and had eighteen registrants. The class was also made available to non-registrants on a drop-in basis and frequently had twenty to twenty-five people present. The course met once a week for one hour for twenty-four weeks. There were no lecture or formal didactic presentations. Each week a relatively short film was shown and followed by group discussion for the remainder of the hour. The discussions were vigorous, sometimes heated, and never failed to consume all the time available. They were sometimes heavy, e.g., the

discussion of rape, and sometimes light, e.g., the discussion of creative interpretation from ambiguous films, usually a mixture of both but always delightful. The discussions were led by a medical humanities faculty member who had a philosophical background. Although invited, other faculty only rarely attended the class. A variety of topics were covered ranging from prejudice and freedom of speech to methods of advertising and sexuality of the elderly. Film titles and their availability are listed below in the Resources section. The issues of reducing prejudice and increasing tolerance of others' differing values were particularly emphasized. Indeed these were the recurring themes regardless of the topic of the film each week. The underlying purpose of the course was to increase the ethical sensitivity of the medical students through promotion of introspection and reflection on social issues. Thus the films frequently depicted situations of caring, sometimes starkly the lack thereof for contrast, which helped the students examine the role of caring in morality through a vicarious affective experience rather than an analytical cognitive experience. The quality of the discussion and personal reports of the students verified the accomplishment of the course's intended purpose.

## DISCUSSION

The practice of medicine, as well as medical education, is primarily the experience of a story. It is the story of one patient followed by the story of another patient and another and so forth which collectively combine to form the story of the physician or medical student. These stories are about affective experiences of suffering and the search for its relief, including that of the physician and medical student at a different level. Many facts are involved in conveying these affective experiences of suffering. But the purpose of facts in medicine is simply to facilitate the experience of relief of suffering. However, in the hustle of teaching and learning more facts, the focus on the affective purpose of medicine is frequently lost. Through the use of story, literature is a potentially powerful tool in medical education for focusing on the affective experience of suffering and the search for its relief. Unfortunately it is not widely recognized and appreciated as such. Similarly the use of film in medical education has this potential to develop the affective focus of medicine but is grossly under utilized and under developed as an educational tool.

It has long been known through work with children that some students are better visual learners, some better tactile learners, some better auditory learners, and so forth. Medical education primarily involves visual

learning, mostly through reading but also through microscope exercises, clinical role modeling, and so forth. Indeed there is the old dictum, "See one, do one, teach one." Society as a whole seems to be increasingly moving toward visual learning as demonstrated by the widespread availability of television, increasing sales of VCR's, fax machines, computer graphic programs, and so forth. Even the usual auditory experience of music has become converted to a partial visual experience through MTV. Therefore it seems appropriate and important to develop ways to promote the affective focus of medicine, namely the relief of suffering, through the use of film.

This affective focus is best accomplished by the promotion of introspection and reflection by medical students. Clearly introspection and critical self-analysis of one's values are facilitated through vicarious experience gained from reading literature or seeing a film. In the film elective described, medical students were regularly challenged to reflect on values, particularly tolerance and prejudice, by discussing what various characters in the films should have done and how the students would have felt if they were in the various situations depicted.

A specific example of the course film promoting introspection and reflection which resulted in influencing the behavior of the students came in response to viewing the film *Walls and Walls*. Initially there was a brief discussion of various types of walls ranging from obvious physical barriers to subtle psychological barriers and how this affected interpersonal interactions. Eventually someone launched an examination of technological barriers. This ranged from a consideration of the ever present mini headphones which cause an otherwise normal person to go around in an apparent daze to a consideration of health care technology which forms a barrier in the patient-physician relationship and which is frequently perceived by the patient, rightly or wrongly, as being detrimental to the patient. From this segment of the discussion on interpersonal relationships it was only a small step to an even more potent issue. Some insights and thoughtful interactions of their own prompted the students to analyze the relationship of the first year students to the second year students and to confront many unnecessary and detrimental barriers between the two classes. All this was followed shortly by a similar analysis and opportunity to confront the many barriers between students and faculty. As a result of this very intense discussion some specific steps were identified by the students which they felt would help reduce and/or remove these barriers that were generally felt to be detrimental to their medical education. The introspection and reflection prompted by the film gave them the resolve which influenced subsequent behaviors and served as a catharsis for many

pent-up feelings. All this came from a simple 10 minute animated cartoon-type film and an atmosphere which provided the opportunity.

### RESOURCE MATERIALS

There are only a few resource materials available which specifically relate to audiovisuals for the medical humanities.<sup>12-13</sup> On the other hand there are numerous commercial companies with audiovisual materials that are easily adapted to the teaching of the medical humanities. Indeed that was the source of most of the material for the course. The bibliographical information for the films used in this course appears in Table 1.

### CONCLUSION

Following a brief consideration of two contrasting purposes for teaching the medical humanities, a description has been given of a film discussion elective course which in the judgment of the students and the instructor was enormously successful. In contrast to the usual teaching of medical ethics which is primarily a cognitive activity emphasizing the development of a code of principles such as justice, autonomy, and beneficence to guide moral behavior, the film discussion elective was primarily an affective activity emphasizing the development of an ethical ideal of caring, tolerance, and reduction of prejudice. The teaching of medical ethics over the past decade or two has been very successful in inculcating the principles of justice, autonomy, and beneficence and in encouraging medical students to follow them and apply them to clinical cases. What is needed now is more of the latter approach of the ethical ideal of caring to balance the former approach.

Implementation of the film discussion elective promoted close faculty-student relationships and close student-student relationships. In that sense the course role-modeled what was attempted in the course, namely, creating an ethical ideal of caring, relatedness, sensitivity to others, and so forth. Clearly, it promoted significant introspection, reflection, and critical self-analysis of values and their influence on interpersonal interactions with others.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**Table 1**  
**Contents of Film Discussion Course**

Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
1	Eye of the Storm	25 min.	prejudice, oppression, discrimination	Guidance Associates The Center for Humn. Inc. Communications Park Box 1000 Mount Kisco, NY 10549 1-800-431-1242 16mm \$505.00 video \$175.00
2	Killing Us Softly: The Images of Women in Advertising	30 min.	exploitation, the effects on society of the way women are portrayed in media advertising	Cambridge Documentary Films Inc. P.O. Box 385 Cambridge, MA 02139 (617) 354-3677 16mm \$450.00 video \$425.00
3	The Speaker	42 min.	freedom of speech, tolerance for different viewpoints, respect for others' rights	Office of Intellectual Freedom American Library Assoc. 50 E. Huron Street Chicago, IL 60611 (312) 944-6331 16mm \$545.00



Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
4	A Jury of Her Peers	30 min.	the differences in the ethical orientations of justice and care and the difference in how they are approached by males and females	Texture Films Inc. 5547 N. Ravenswood Ave. Chicago, IL 60640 1-800-323-4222 16mm \$550.00 video \$129.00
5	The Shopping Bag Lady	21 min.	attitudes toward the homeless, poor and elderly, the influence of group and peer psychology	Learning Corp. of America 108 Wilmot Road Deerfield, IL 60015 1-800-621-2131 16mm \$425.00 video \$290.00
6	Johnny Lingo	24 min.	the influence of one's self esteem on one's success and outlook in life	Britannica Films 310 S. Michigan Ave. Chicago, IL 60604 1-800-554-9862 16mm \$475.00 video \$300.00
7	Pink Triangles	35 min.	homophobia, oppression, prejudice against lesbians and gay men	Cambridge Documentary Films, Inc. P.O. Box 385 Cambridge, MA 02139 (617) 354-3677 16mm \$500.00 video \$475.00

**Table 1 (cont'd.)**  
**Contents of Film Discussion Course**

Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
8	Joseph Schultz	13 min.	courage, respect for life, individual moral responsibility, peer pressure, one's ability to resist evil	Wombat Productions Inc. 250 West 57th Street Suite 916 New York, NY 10019 (212) 315-2502 16mm \$250.00 video \$140.00
9	Walls and Walls	10 min.	the great variety of walls in one's life and how they serve as physical and psychological barriers	Filmfair Communications 10900 Ventura Boulevard P.O. Box 1728 Studio City, CA 91604 (818) 985-0244 16mm \$190.00 video \$89.00
10	How Could I Not Be Among You	28 min.	death and dying, one's response to a terminal diagnosis, the fragility of life	Benchmark Films 145 Scarborough Road Briarcliff Manor, NY 10510 (914) 762-3838 16mm \$525.00 video \$473.00

Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
11	Peege	28 min.	attitudes toward the elderly and infirm, sensitivity and compassion, care for the aged	Phoenix/BFA Films 468 Parke Ave. South New York, NY 10016 1-800-221-1274 16mm \$560.00 video \$325.00
12	Flo and Charlie	28 min.	the enormous problem of homelessness in America, friendships, attitudes toward the poor and destitute	Franciscan Communications 1229 South Santee St. Los Angeles, CA 90015 1-800-421-8510 16mm not available video \$19.95
13	Deliverance (excerpts)	15 min.	male homosexual rape, fear, appeal to rule vs. consequences in ethical decision-making	Available at most home video centers. 16mm not available video \$24.98
14	The Other Side of Rape	30 min.	female rape, sensitivity in medical exam of rape patient, fear, rage, psychological trauma	Health Sciences Consortium 201 Silver City Court Churchill, NC 27514 (919) 942-8731 16mm not available video \$330.00

**Table 1 (cont'd)**  
**Contents of Film Discussion Course**

Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
15	The Blame Game	20 min.	communication skills, creating positive personal relationships, openness, truthfulness	Phoenix/BFA Films 468 Parke Ave. South New York, NY 10016 1-800-221-1274 16mm \$410.00 video \$250.00
16	Like Other People	37 min.	attitudes toward the disabled, the sexual and emotional needs of the physically handicapped, quality of life	Perennial Education, Inc. 930 Pitner Avenue Evanston, IL 60202 1-800-323-9084 16mm \$442.00 video \$392.00
17	Walter Fish	6 min.	the nature of a helping re- lationship and the many obstacles to it	Alba House Communications P.O. Box 595 Canfield, OH 44406 1-800-533-2522 16mm \$68.95 filmstrip \$25.95 video not available

Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
17	Joshua in a Box	5 min.	freedom, innate rebelliousness, security of limits, conditions for happiness	Churchill Films 662 N. Robertson Boulevard Los Angeles, CA 90069 1-800-334-7830 16mm \$145.00 video \$100.00
18	Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge	30 min.	death and dying, the fragility of life, stimulates critical thinking and creative interpretation	Festival Films 2841 Irving Avenue South Minneapolis, MN 55408 (612) 870-4744 16mm \$175.00 video \$39.95
19	Joseph Mengele	9 min.	the use of human subjects in medical experimentation, prejudice, oppression, hate, forgiveness	Not commercially available. Borrowed from the Facing History and Ourselves Nat'l. Foundation, Inc. 25 Kennard Road Brookline, MA 02146 (617) 726-0156
20	The Touch Film with Dr. Jessie Potter	22 min.	the importance of touch in development and throughout the life span	Sterling Productions 1112 N. Ridgeland Oak Park, IL 60302 (312) 383-1710 16mm \$425.00 video \$390.00

**Table 1 (cont'd.)  
Contents of Film Discussion Course**

Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
21	Klan Youth Corps	10 min.	hate, prejudice, violence, bigotry, how these concepts are taught to youth	Carousel Film & Video 260 5th Avenue, Room 705 New York, NY 10001 (212) 683-1660 16mm \$250.00 video \$150.00
22	Unnecessary Fuss; (excerpts)  also Animal Research: The Cost of Hope	15 min.  20 min.	the pros and cons of the use of animals in medical research and education	Not commercially available. Borrowed from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals P.O. Box 42516 Washington, DC 20015 (202) 726-0156
23	Rose By Any Other Name	15 min.	sexuality of the elderly, loneliness, care of the aged, importance of human relationships	Multi-Focus, Inc. 1525 Franklin Street San Francisco, CA 94109 1-800-821-0514 16mm \$350.00 video \$250.00

Week #	Title of Film	Running Time	Issues Raised	Source
24	AIDS: Changing the Rules	30 min.	the psychological and physical impact of AIDS, the need for explicit communication about sexuality	Weta Educ. Activities P.O. Box 2626 Washington, DC 20013 16mm not available video \$30.00