

THE LOWE BRINGS ART AND MEDICINE TOGETHER

Bringing Arts Back to a Science-Focused System

By: Melanie D'Andrea | News and Public Affairs Director

It seems that education is reaching a new epoch, an era that emphasizes science, vocabulary, strategic writing skills and standardized testing. It is unbelievable how quickly art programs are being cut, not only in Miami or Florida, but all around the United States.

But who is to say that local schools are not given tough budgets and low resources to overcome these decisions? Pamela D'Andrea, a recent college graduate entering the teaching profession, admits that the science trend is almost inevitable: "as I get more involved, I realize how difficult it really is. When I was in high school, I used to think all the budget cuts were malicious, but now that I am in the system, schools are truly given little options."

Even graduate schools emphasize high scores on standardized exams, which heavily focus on verbal and quantitative skills. It is evident that the entire nation's education focus, from elementary school to graduate programs, has been gravitating towards the sciences.

One of the largest science-fueled programs is education in medicine. Strangely enough, many medical programs are doing the opposite shift, and have realized the great impact visual acuity and art education has on a working practitioner.

There is a growing trend in medical schools nationwide to now offer art courses in hopes that the students' observation and diagnostic skills will improve. One art teaching strategy is called Visual Thinking Strategies,

a technique of looking at art with great detail while breaking down assumptions of the artwork's meaning. Harvard and the University of Washington medical students have already been taking part of weekly classes focusing on Visual Thinking Strategies. In June, the University of Miami decided to catch on and host its first Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) course to its medical school at their Lowe Art Museum.

As the students walked in and sat down to one of their many lectures of their medical career, there was a lot of uncertainty and anticipation in the room. Hope Torrents, the schools program director at

the Lowe and a well-trained advocate of VTS, began the lecture with a simple question: “Why are you here?”. After a lot of chair shuffling and general silence, one brave student raised her hand and hesitantly said “to learn to observe”. Hope smiled and agreed, then continued with the process.

The students are presented with a painting , while the curator only asks “What do you see?”. With each student response, the curator rephrases and repeats what was said to make sure the point is interpreted correctly. If the statement is an assumption, such as “there is alot of sadness”, the curator asks to elaborate with the question: “What do you see that makes you say that”?

After the repetition of these questions, the students were able to find great detail in the paintings while reflect on their assumptions. Then the students were made curators, and the few brave volunteers led their own VTS sessions. One medical student curator discussed that “getting input without your own is difficult, staying neutral is difficult”.

This is a parallel to how difficult it is for patients to describe pain or their condition in a manner that is interpreted by the doctors correctly. Doctors must be able to read physical signs while also ask their patients to explain better in a diagnostic-neutral way. Asking questions geared towards a suspected diagnosis may lead further tests and conclusions the wrong way. VTS believes in keeping the interpretation open to avoid priming.

The VTS mission statement acclaims that “By using VTS, students learn to make meaning from the world around them, to gain confidence in their own ideas while respecting those of others, and to contribute to a thoughtful debate amongst a group of peers.”

Hope explained to the students, “In academia we rely heavily on text, right and wrong answers-so developing visual skills and visual observations is not really taught. However, visual literacy, like reading literacy, is as important to our everyday lives, especially in medicine.”

Those hesitant students before the VTS sessions had transformed into believers. They experienced the difficulties of explaining what you see or feel and had become interested in mastering the technique in order to better diagnose a patient.

To see the results of this program, a more longitudinal class schedule would need to be in place and studied. However, this one session brought awareness to the medical students and professors of the impact art

programs and visual discipline can have.

Perhaps better listening, better diagnosing and better healthcare lies not in the sciences, but in the arts. This awakening is incredible to see in our backyard, especially in the drastic pro-science educational shifts around the nation.

Image Credit to:Jodi Cypher