

# Narrative Medicine

## Using Literary Methods to Interpret Illness Stories in German Medical Education



### Close Reading

(defined by Rita Charon in *Narrative Medicine*)

#### 1. Observation

Signs of perceiving, details, descriptions, sensory aspects

#### 2. Perspective

single or multiple perspectives

How are these perspectives conveyed?

#### 3. Form

genre, usage of metaphor or imagery, allusions or inserted texts; temporal structure; diction

#### 4. Voice

first-person, second-person, or third person voice;

Is the teller near or far, intimate or remote?

#### 5. Mood

What is the mood of the text?

What mood does reading it leave you in?

#### 6. Motion

Does the teller seem to move from the beginning to the end? Does the story bring you somewhere in its course?



Skills Lab course  
"Erzählungen in der Medizin"  
(summer term 2016)

### INTRODUCTION

„Narrative Medicine“ was developed by Rita Charon, who is a Professor of Clinical Medicine with a PhD in English literature at Columbia University in New York City. Charon argues for **the centrality of storytelling and narratives in medicine**. In the “Program in Narrative Medicine,” she trains doctors in **the use of literary methods** so that they develop “narrative competence” which will help them “to **open up the stories of their patients to nuanced understanding and appreciation**” (Charon 110).

### BACKGROUND

The methods of Narrative Medicine were tested in two 6-week courses in the Skills Lab at the Medical Center of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (winter term 2015/16 and summer term 2016). The Skills Lab offers medical students a peer-to-peer learning environment to enhance medical skills such as venipuncture, intubation and ultrasonic testing.

The course was voluntary, involved no exams or grades and was conceived as a supplement to the German medical curriculum. Each class was 75 minutes long.

At the end of 6 weeks, both courses were evaluated anonymously; the return rate was 100%.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The course aimed at developing a set of skills in students of medicine, such as:

- applying methods of narrative analysis to (non-)fictional patient stories
- locating gaps in a story and developing a sense for what is not being said
- enhancing the students' attention and observational skills
- recognizing blind spots in their own perceptions
- appreciating multiple, conflicting perspectives on an illness narrative
- honoring the complexity and ambiguity of patients' stories and diseases
- reflecting on their own role as a medical professionals, their individual biases and conflicts.

### METHODS

- presentations by the instructors (brief input on current studies in the fields of Medical Humanities)
- discussions of a literary or visual piece of art (preceded by an introduction into the methods of narrative analysis and close reading, see left box)
- writing exercises with the help of a writing prompt

### EXEMPLARY TEXTS AND EXERCISES

#### Literary Texts (Selection):

- “Das Bein” by Valerie Fritsch (short story)
- “Der Panther” by Rainer Maria Rilke (poem)
- “What the Doctor said” by Raymond Carver (poem)
- “The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing” by David Foster Wallace (short story, audio book)
- “The English Patient” by Michael Ondaatje (excerpt from the novel)
- “Arbeit und Struktur” by Wolfgang Herrndorf (excerpt from the novel)

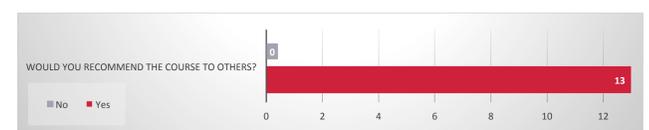
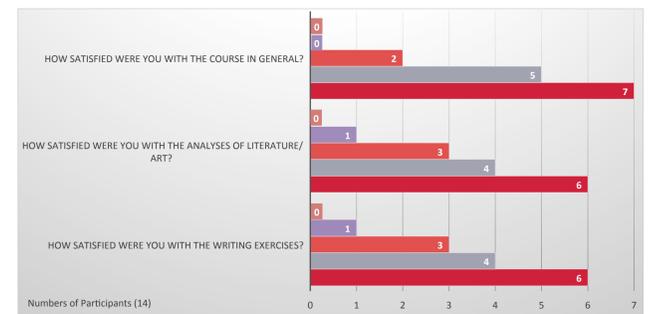
#### Visual Art:

- “Christina's World” by Andrew Wyeth (painting)
- “Property of Jo Spence” by Jo Spence and “Self-Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare” by Sam Taylor-Wood (photography)

#### Writing Prompts (Selection):

- “Describe something you noticed when you watched someone or something very closely” (Fritsch, “Das Bein”)
- “Write about a metaphor” (Wallace, “Planet Trillaphon”)
- “Describe a scene of care” (Ondaatje, “English Patient”)
- “Describe the world from the perspective of someone in the clinic” (Wyeth, “Christina's World”)

### EVALUATION



#### Students' Voices

(based on the open questions in the course evaluations)

#### What did you learn in the course?

- “to be open minded to different interpretations”
- “to honor the value of art and literature for each individual”
- “to be more mindful of language and read ‘between the lines’”
- “an increased access to my own emotionality”

#### Do you think that the topics of the workshop are relevant for your future work with patients? If so, why?

- “Every patient/human being requires some form of interpretation in order to understand them as individuals with concerns of their own.”
- “Interpretation, but first of all recognition of a story as such, changes the contact with the person, who told the story. Anamneses as the core competence of medical activities is easier said than done, and this course helped me to reflect on and adjust my interaction with patients.”
- “The concept of Narrative Medicine appears reasonable to me and (...) I believe that engaging with literature can be highly beneficial for medical students in general. The concept breaks away from the relatively uniform scheme of teaching in medicine. It supports active learning and, particularly, it encourages students to keep asking questions.”

### DISCUSSION

**Is „close reading“ of patient's stories “doable” in the reality of medical practice?** Some students doubted that the time pressure in the clinic would not allow them to listen more closely to patients' stories. Indeed, close reading takes time. Narrative Medicine shares the demands of many physicians to have more time with their patients

1. to establish closer relationships with patients and
2. to prevent signs of dissatisfaction and burn-out on the side of the physicians.

**The writing exercises received mixed results:** Some students did not see the use in it or the relation to medical practice, while others found them especially useful for reflection. Writing, particularly free writing or creative writing, is not very common in Germany, let alone in German medical education. As a tool, it can foster self-observation, articulation and self-care, offering students means to use their individual perceptions and experiences as generative resources towards deeper understanding and self-care.

### REFERENCES

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