

Popular Literature in Public Health: Exploring Connections Between Public Health and Humanities

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The use of stories in the classroom provides the opportunity to engage students by capturing their imaginations or sparking an emotional response. When students make connections with these texts, their reflection and class contributions help them to make meaning of the content while also making course content more personal and real. The purpose of this study is to describe students' experiences taking an elective course, which merged popular literature and public health.* **Methods:** *Students taking a newly developed, writing intensive course, Popular Literature in Public Health were invited to respond to a survey regarding their course experience. In addition, they had the option of sharing their final book reports and course reflections. The survey contained both open and closed ended responses.* **Results:** *The response rate was 89%. Over half of the students took the course because it was non-conventional, and the majority were influenced by the opportunity to learn from the written accounts of others. The overwhelming majority of students noted that this course had a positive influence. In total, there were 3 common themes appearing throughout student responses: 1). Stimulating Thinking; 2). Comparison between traditional texts and popular literature; 3). The Value of Discussion-Based Learning.* **Conclusions:** *The authors conclude that this is type of course can be a positive addition to public health programs, and offer a unique, yet important perspective on public health.* **Recommendations:** *Public health undergraduate programs should consider the addition of such cross disciplinary courses.*

Keywords: Humanities, Public Health, Narrative Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Using popular literature as a teaching and learning tool promotes critical and reflective thinking and allows students to make personal connections with health concepts and other

students. As students read and connect with these texts, they make sense of the content, themselves, and the world around them. Popular literature enhances traditional textbook readings by making content come alive and relevant to students.

There are many examples of teaching with stories to engage students in discussion and reflection as they gain insight about health concepts from multiple perspectives. Autobiographies, for example, can provide health students with insight to experiences such as illness and disability. Harrawood, Mariska & Hill (2013) explored using autobiographies with student counselors in training to present the dynamics of addiction. Their students were able to apply the abstract and theoretical understanding of addiction while reading the narrative of the lived experience of addiction. Similarly, McAllister, Brien, Alexander & Flynn (2014) used autobiographies as a teaching tool for mental health nursing students to explore eating disorders. Reading these memoirs and participating in guided discussions allows students to realize the importance of empathy in their professional practice. These class activities ask students to engage with the text, essentially translating the narrative by articulating its connections with public health.

Popular texts are written for the general public and both Mathibe (2007) and Kirkpatrick & Brown (2004) found that these easy-to-read stories helped students to increase information retention and interest in health topics. When students make connections with these texts, the information becomes more believable and memorable. These characters, situations, and scenes may prompt students to reflect on their personal experiences while providing them with insight about another person's experience. These stories may even serve as inspiration and foster personal growth when students truly connect with the text (Kirkpatrick & Brown, 2004).

Indeed, powerful stories draw us in and engage the reader beyond the cognitive level by capturing our imagination or prompting an emotional response. When students make connections with these texts, their reflection and class contributions help them to make meaning of the content while also making course content more personal and real. Additionally, as students make these connections, they improve their critical thinking, communication, and health literacy skills. Using stories as a teaching tool, students may explore multiple experiences and perspectives. Through in-class activities, students further reflect and connect to the texts by sharing their subjective experiences and thoughts while reading. The purpose of this

study is to describe students' experiences taking an elective course, which merged popular literature and public health. A description of the course precedes the summary of experience.

About the Popular Literature in Public Health Course

This course was developed by an author of this paper (CHB). This course was created as a writing intensive course, indicating that content included substantial drafting, critiquing, and overall writing experiences. The overarching purpose of the course was to examine public health content through popular literature. Content included, but was not limited to, issues in nutrition, death and dying, drug and alcohol abuse, pandemics and epidemics, global health, and social determinants of health. Through in-depth class discussion of selected books, topics were discussed and debated in class.

The following books were read as a class in the Fall 2015 semester, which was the basis for this paper. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Kidder, 2003), *Breaking Night* (Murray, 2010), *Mind on Fire* (Cahalan, 2012), *The Other Wes Moore* (Moore, 2011). For each book, an overarching public health concern was a focal point, which guided in-class discussions, response papers, and culminated in in-class student presentations to disseminate information on the topic. *Breaking Night* introduced the class to homelessness and issues related to drug addiction. *Mind on Fire* introduced the class to mental health issues, rare illness, and navigating the health care system. *The Other Wes Moore* introduced the class to health disparities and the interplay between social, economic, and environmental factors in public health. In addition, students were asked to choose one book from a list of books for their final book review project in greater detail described below.

METHODS

In the Fall of 2015, students were invited to complete a survey at the end of the course. The survey was designed to elicit both descriptive quantitative information as well as open ended, qualitative information. In order to assure anonymity and the voluntary nature of the course, the professor did not participate in distributing the survey to the students. Instead students were directed to pick up a survey on their own and complete it. Open-ended questions were reviewed using the Grounded

Theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). All responses were read several times and main themes were extracted. Once themes were established, they were read again, and illustrative quotations were recorded. This project was approved by the Human Subject's Committee at William Paterson University (Protocol #2016-318).

Survey

The following descriptive information was collected from each student: gender, age, major, and class year. Students were asked to rank their interest in reading popular literature prior to taking the course, as well as after taking the course. The following ranking choices were used: very interested, somewhat interested, and not at all interested. The following open-ended questions were included:

1. Why did you take this course in public health?
2. In what ways, if any, do you feel that literature and health are related?
3. In what ways, if any, has this course influenced your views on reading?
4. In what ways, if any, has this course influenced your views on writing?
5. In what ways, if any, has this course influenced your views on public health?
6. Explain your optimal learning style.
7. Describe the structure of this course.
8. In what ways, if any, has this course structure supported your learning?
9. In what ways, if any, has this course structure hindered your learning?
10. How would you summarize your experience learning public health through literature?

Final Project

In addition, students were given the option to share their final essay projects in which they analyzed a popular book related to public health. This assignment involved a reaction to the book highlighting scenes in the book that moved the student in some way. Students were asked to describe in detail their reaction(s) to these scenes. In addition, students were asked to include a description of how they felt the given book related to public health and what the implications are. The final section of the assignment was to focus on their experience taking this course as an elective and what ways, if any they felt incorporating popular literature into their coursework was feasible.

RESULTS

Closed-ended survey results

A total of 19 students were enrolled in the course. In all, 17 students chose to answer the survey (89% response rate). The mean age of students who completed the survey was 24 years of age. The year in school of the respondents is as follows: Freshman (n=1; 6%) Sophomore (n=4; 23.5%) Junior (n=12; 70.5%). The breakdown of majors was as follows: Applied Health (n=3; 18%), Political Science (n=1; 6%), Chemistry (n=1; 6%), Biology (n=1; 6%), and Public Health (n=11, 65%). The breakdown of the levels of interest in reading popular literature prior to the course is as follows: very interested (n=4; 23.6%), somewhat interested (n=6; 35.2%), and not interested (n=7; 41.2%). The breakdown of the levels of interest in reading popular literature after the course is as follows: very interested (n=16; 94%), somewhat interested (n=1; 6%), and not interested (n=0).

Open-ended survey results

The open-ended survey results are described below. Results were read and common themes were extracted. The number of times the theme was mentioned, and the percent of students who mentioned the particular theme is indicated below.

The reason why students took the course was varied with most respondents mentioning the fact that it was a writing intensive course and therefore taking it would fulfill a requirement (n=8; 47%), and that they were interested in the course because it seemed non-conventional (n=9; 53%). In response to the question asking what ways, if any, literature and health were related, the majority mentioned that it provided a way to learn through personal accounts (n=14; 82%).

When asked if their views on reading had been influenced, all of respondents (n=17; 100%) indicated a positive level of influence on interest in reading popular literature. When asked if their views on writing had been influenced, respondents had a variety of responses ranging from the feeling that their views on writing have not changed (n=3; 18%) to recognizing the value of the written word (n=2; 12%) feeling free to express themselves through writing in a creative way (n=8; 47%) gaining experience (n=2; 12%).

When asked, in what ways, if any, has this course influenced your views on public health, all students noted that public health issues are happening all around us (n=17; 100%), and some pointed out that these texts make us realize the importance on a clinical, global, and/or community level (n=3; 18%). The optimal learning themes of the students varied, and the following themes were mentioned: ability for in-depth class discussions, interactions, and critical thinking (n=10; 59%), reading that does not involve a text book (n=4; 24%), non-lecture based courses (n=1; 6%). Students described this particular course with the following common themes: low pressure and comfortable (n=3; 18%); absence of memorizing information for exams (n=2; 12%); engaging and interactive (n=7; 41%); unique (n=1; 6%); allowed for creativity (n=3; 18%). The structure of the course proved to be an important part of the learning experience. When asked how the course structure supported learning, most respondents commented on a hands on, forum discussion style (n=8; 47%), and one highlighted the importance that it was not a traditional undergraduate structure (n=1; 6%). When asked how the course structure may have hindered learning, none of the students reported any hindrances. The final survey question asked students to summarize their experience learning public health topics through literature. The most common themes for these responses were that this format brought to light different insights on public health (n=11; 65%) the open discussion format will have a lasting impact on remembering the content (n=2; 12%) that it enhanced a love for reading (n=3; 18%). This was also explored in a more in-depth fashion in the final essays.

Final Essay Results

As mentioned previously, the final essay project involved analyzing a popular book related to public health. This assignment involved responding to the book, highlighting scenes that moved the student in some way. Students were asked to describe in detail their reaction(s) to these scenes. In addition, students were asked to include a description of how they felt the given book related to public health and what the implications are. Student reactions to these books are outlined in Table 1. These responses indicate that students were making connections with other fields of study, reflecting on social determinants of health and health

disparities, as well as considering global-level influences on health.

The final section of the assignment was to focus on their experience taking this course as an elective and what ways, if any they felt incorporating popular literature into their coursework was feasible. Table 2 demonstrates the common themes expressed by the students when asked to describe their experience taking the course. These common themes were drawn from reading all responses and an illustrative quote to provide a better idea of the types of comments embodied in the given category. In total, there were 3 common themes appearing throughout student responses: 1). Stimulating thinking; 2). Comparison between traditional texts and popular literature; and 3). The value of discussion-based learning. Stimulating thinking was a popular comment and students responded that the course encouraged them to think about public health in a way that they had not before, or in a way that was not typical of their traditional course content. Another frequent theme pertained to the difference in the experience of reading traditional texts and popular literature for public health courses. Often students expressed the ease with which they read the assigned books for this course in popular literature, whereas they frequently struggled with a more traditional, rote textbook. In addition, this common theme also included comments related to how the selected texts changed the way the students thought about a public health issue, that they were already familiar with from other course content. The final common theme was the value of discussion-based learning. Straying from a lecture style format proved to be a valuable aspect of the course. Students typically highlighted the fact that a class based on discussions and participation from classmates was unique. In addition, they felt that it was underemphasized in the curriculum, but necessary to gain real world, bigger picture perspectives.

CONCLUSIONS

This study offers insight into incorporating the narrative into public health curricula. The findings of this study indicate that students were able to critically evaluate public health issues through relevant popular literature. This course appealed to students because of the non-traditional format, the sense in which it stimulated thinking, and the emphasis on

discussion and group analysis. Through in-class discussions and presentations, students demonstrated their ability to engage with and articulate public health topics from both personal and professional perspectives further honing their health literacy skills.

The percentage of students who were very interested in reading popular literature in public health increased substantially after the course was completed. Thus, suggesting that the use of narrative pedagogy in the classroom can have long lasting benefits. Further, this study demonstrated that students' perceptions of public health were broadened through use of the narrative.

As discussed by McAllister, et. al (2014), using popular literature as a pedagogical tool helps to make complex health experiences more accessible to undergraduate learners. Since these texts are written for the general public, with language that is easy-to-read and understand, students are able to engage with these narrative accounts of public health concepts (illness, treatment, disparities) as experienced by patients and families. Additionally, students call on their critical thinking skills as they transfer this empathy and understanding of the text from one genre, autobiography, for example, to the broader context of public health. Students further develop their communication skills as they articulate these connections between public health course content and their own lives. By encouraging students to think and speak about health concepts in a variety of contexts improves both their communication skills and health literacy aptitude.

Narrative pedagogy is frequently associated with nursing education as it allows students and teachers to employ narratives as a basis for reflection on clinical experiences and nursing knowledge. Using stories to explore and interpret experiences, to challenge assumptions, and to think beyond rote course content knowledge is a relevant approach for teaching and learning across the health and social sciences as well. Narrative pedagogy supports learning objectives that are the foundation of health science learning: critical thinking, communication skills, awareness of multiple points of view, and the ability to observe and reflect. (Brady & Asselin, 2016).

Additionally, narrative pedagogy allows students to build upon their critical thinking skills. This approach to teaching supports interpretive thinking where multiple perspectives are welcomed and learning is a process of making meaning (Scheckel & Ironside, 2006, Ironside, 2003& 2006). Students feel empowered by sharing their own experiences and from recognizing the skills and knowledge they have mastered. By reflecting on and sharing narratives, students begin to appreciate the significance of their relationships to others and to foster empathy for others (Brady & Asselin, 2016). Using stories as a teaching tool serves to increase an awareness of other perspectives while enhancing students' critical thinking and communication skills.

This study is limited in that it was a cross sectional design, and the sample size was small. In addition, there were 2 students who chose not to complete the survey, and the instrument used was not validated as this is exploratory research. Despite these limitations, however, the response rate was high, and the input provided on the course experience was insightful. With an emergence in degree and certificate programs focused on medical humanities, narrative medicine, and similar foci, this research is germane.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Narrative pedagogy emphasizes reflection as a learning process where students and teachers use stories to share and uncover new understandings as a conversation, creating a community within the classroom. (Dahlberg, Ekebergh & Ironside, 2003). This approach to learning creates an environment where students and teachers may openly share their observations and experiences in a safe space. Using narratives, such as autobiographies and non-fiction accounts of illness, pandemic, or health policy, engages students to connect with these texts and with their classmates as they bridge their course content knowledge with their professional practice and personal experiences.

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Table 1. Reactions to Scenes Implications of Books Read for Final Projects

Book Title	Selected Reaction to Scene	Description of how they felt the given book related to public health and what the implications are
Being Mortal Gawande, A. (2014)	<p>“It’s amazing to read about these extraordinary people who are willing to change nursing homes and assisted living facilities.”</p> <p>“You must be very patient to go into this field. You have to be willing to listen and have the ability to sort through everything to get to the bottom of things.”</p>	<p>“In public health, we need to be more aware of the effects of aging. We need to educate the elderly, family members, the community, and health professionals. The community needs to work together to understand aging and lead by example for generations to come.”</p>
The Checklist Manifesto Gawande, A. (2009)	<p>“It was alarming that the doctors and nurses at first did not even have enough linens and chlorhexidine soap to even carry out the checklist.”</p>	<p>“The concept of a checklist reduces error and increases discipline in any organization. For example, a simple checklist can break down the complexity of surgery into several manageable tasks...”</p> <p>“There are many ways a checklist could be implicated in a public health setting because it is so versatile and applicable to many situations.”</p>
The Ghost Map Johnson, S. (2006).	<p>“Dr. John Snow’s persistence in this book was inspiring, he didn’t give up researching even when other scientists told him that the illness was because of the contaminated air.”</p>	<p>“The Ghost Map discusses the most important issues that affect humanity at a global level.”</p>
Bad Blood Jones, J. H. (1992).	<p>“Another alarming component were the “benefits” that were offered. They were under the impression that they were getting the best of the best. Because that time, African Americans could only dream of having medical care and survivors’ insurance since it was unaffordable for them.”</p> <p>“They were acting on their own accord maybe even trying new alternatives for other ailments to boost their egos and their stature in the field.”</p>	<p>“This experience has become a nationwide icon of science, a metaphor in the black community for threatening motives in medical research.”</p> <p>“History does manage to repeat itself if we do not take the necessary measures to ensure the advancement of social norms.”</p>
Merchants of Doubt Oreskes, N. & Conway, E. (2010).	<p>“The data the scientists had on tobacco was indisputable and well-researched but the Merchants were able to shrug off any claim that scientists had simply by discrediting their views.”</p>	<p>“The book showed that the fight is long and hard, but with enough patience and scientific research eventually policies and laws can be made to promote healthier lives. It showed that there are people working and fighting for the wrong side and usually they will have more power and leverage, but that should not stop the work that the public health community is doing to better living situations around the planet.”</p>

<p>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks Skloot, R. (2010).</p>	<p>“Racism is the reason Henrietta’s family remained poor while rich doctors benefited from her cells.”</p>	<p>“Informed consent is typically given by a patient to a doctor for treatment with knowledge of the possible risks and benefits. The doctor took Henrietta’s cells without her consent or permission and used it for medical research. It was wrong for the doctor to remove her tissues.”</p>
<p>Awakenings Sacks, O. (1999).</p>	<p>“I came to realize that at these haphazard intersections of philosopher and physician he is able to reveal much about his patients’ lives and add a weight that, at least impacted me in a way I didn’t realize possible.”</p>	<p>“Very much of what we learn is from an observational point of view; there is a lack of intimacy and relaying the humane aspect of things, whether it is disease or a verbal exchange, when dealing with text books. “</p>
<p>Pathologies of Power Farmer, P., & Sen, A. (2004).</p>	<p>“Acephie’s story left an impression on me because I am also a 28-year-old girl; however, the struggles I face are nothing close to Acephie. I was taught safe sex, I was vaccinated, I live a comfortable life and I don’t have to worry about where my next meal will come from. I have access to doctors, hospitals, and clean water. I do have a job, but if I lost it, then it wouldn’t be the end of my life because my parents are able to financially support me.”</p>	<p>“Farmer presents his ideas through the stories of everyday people suffering from issues related to poverty and the infringement of their human rights. All stories were harsh to read because of the reality they prove about our human state.....”</p>

Table 2. Experience Taking Course and Thoughts on Incorporating Literature into Coursework

Common Theme	Illustrative Quote(s) From Final Essay
Stimulating Thinking	<p>“I have not read the “cannot put this down” kind of books in a very long time, until I took this course.”</p> <p>“Reading about real people and the adversity they faced allowed us to be connected as humans not just numbers.”</p> <p>“Our class discussions had my mind wandering the most! I love to hear others opinions, thoughts, etc., because it is interesting to see things from different views that I could never think of.”</p> <p>“The books stimulated further thinking, and opened your eyes to certain things.”</p>
Comparison between Traditional Texts and Popular Literature	<p>“I really enjoyed this new perspective on public health because it made everything I learned in all my other public health classes real to me.”</p> <p>“This class helped me see that I don’t just need to open up a text book to look up statistics on public health problems around the world. There are factual stories, written by the people who have witnessed them first-hand.”</p> <p>“Many of the things we’ve learned throughout the years in our public health courses appeared in each book.”</p> <p>“I think to be a good public health advocate, you must be able to have an open mind and have the ability to see how life is for other people. Reading books like these are the key to seeing life through someone else’s experiences.”</p> <p>“Reading has not only helped me in this class, but it also helped me in other classes. Reading these books has increased my vocabulary, analytical thinking skills, and writing skills and improved my concentration and understanding of the kinds of issues going on in society.”</p>
The Value of Discussion-Based Learning	<p>“It provided a different and unique way of learning that most college students do not get to participate in.”</p> <p>“I feel training in any other way is incomplete; you are able to diagnose and prescribe, but if you are unaware of the larger picture and what is going on, then you are merely a band aid on a broken system.”</p>