

C 2.7. COMMUNICATION – FULL ARTICLE

Aphorisms as an Educational Strategy in the Health Sciences: An Experimental Essay

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ABSTRACT: An aphorism is an expression of simple construction, usually succinct and sententious, with a high density of content. In the words of one of the authors (JLAG), it is an intelligent and orphic summary or abstraction which, due to its brevity and singularity, has an evocative character. Once grasped, it becomes an easy motto to apply in exhibitions, forming part of verbal scientific elegance. The challenge for the authors was to set a strategy to evaluate the usefulness of its inclusion in an extracurricular teaching/learning activity addressing various aspects of health, in an era in which motivation and adherence are highly dependent on technology. The Museu *Memórias da Saúde* (Health Memories Museum, MdS museum), at the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Beira Interior, supports educational activities while preserving historical pieces and documents, and has organized thematic serial exhibitions on ethical and historical subjects. The authors, who are responsible for the initiative, questioned its efficiency, as exhibiting does not necessarily mean reaching the targeted population. To attain this endpoint, a consultation and participation evaluation component was added to an exhibition of William Osler's aphorisms. Tools were created for interaction and for quantifying active visitors and those who completed the collaboration, along with their comments. After four weeks of exhibition, not a single valid opinion was recorded. From the analysis of the limitations of the strategy and the disappointing result, conclusions can be drawn to guide the development of future educational initiatives with similar objectives.

KEYWORDS: Medical Aphorisms; Medical Education; Medical Humanities; Museum Education; Student Engagement

BACKGROUND AND AIM

Clinical medicine has greatly increased its scientific knowledge but it has not lost, nor can it lose, its inherent field of human relationships and the practice limitations based only on probability. This is clear from the words of Joseph Alpert (2025) when he wrote “I estimate that at least half of my outpatient visits and many of my inpatient consults involve relieving patients of

anxiety caused by their illness or fear of illness”. There is no doubt that health professionals who deal with patients require, other than knowledge, a humanistic behavioural profile, a subject that must be stressed during high school education. Health professionals are one of the groups that should be best endowed with humanistic skills. To educate is to create habits; to educate well is to create good habits, and to do so adequate models shall

be chosen. The aphorism is a verbal expression with a definition profile, usually a succinct but sententious phrase with a high density of content. It is transmitted as an apothegm and has either a direct and intelligible character, difficult to contradict, or a challenge profile posing provocative questions of interpretation on more controversial subjects. Due to their current shortness and condensation there is room for misinterpretation (Aronson, 2022). However, if they may be accepted as truths at a certain time and context, and not definitive neither purely affirmative (Bursztajn & Hamm, 1979; Chandler & Blommfield, 1987; Yost, 2012), they shall be taken mainly as tools for provocative interpretation and internalization of behaviour, ethical or technical relevant subjects, particularly in health-connected professions. In accordance with Correa-Rivero (2022), “We must work hard to deeply humanize students and prevent the dehumanization by action of the hidden curriculum and the structure of most medical programs”.

The museum has structured several exhibitions based on ethical themes or the history of the health professions, some involving humour, but without any evaluation of their impact. However, if a teacher wants to be effective, he must adopt methods and techniques that allow messages to reach their recipients. At the university level, learning progressively involves the student assuming an active role, while the teacher serves as tutor, enhancer and motivator. In a preliminary step to evaluate the receptivity of an exhibition based on current methodology of displaying posters with William Osler’s aphorisms, we asked students to individ-

ually record their commentaries through a specifically designed platform. We had no great expectations of adherence but wanted to confirm that simply displaying the material in an obligatory passage area and announcing its existence would not be enough to bring teachers and students to volunteer.

Rational for the experiment

The rationale for the experiment was based on the following assumptions: (1) all professionals linked to FCS-UBI should enjoy cultural activities that keep alive the flame of the humanities; (2) the use of aphorisms as a theme is suitable for this purpose; (3) an expository approach can be a way of attracting students to the humanities; (4) the MdS museum has been organizing exhibitions at FCS-UBI (although not only there) as part of its interactive activities; (5) the effectiveness of these initiatives has never been quantified; and (6) this gap justified the present evaluation.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A pilot experiment was designed based on a request for collaboration consisting of commenting on a set of aphorisms by William Osler displayed on posters (Fig. 1 and 2). Conditions were created for interaction, feedback and quantification (Fig. 3 and 4). The experiment logistics and strategy included: (1) an installation phase of supposed inactivity; (2) an initial exhibition period (basal, without email announcement) during a two-week period; and (3) a period after promotional announcement by e-mail, with a three-week duration.

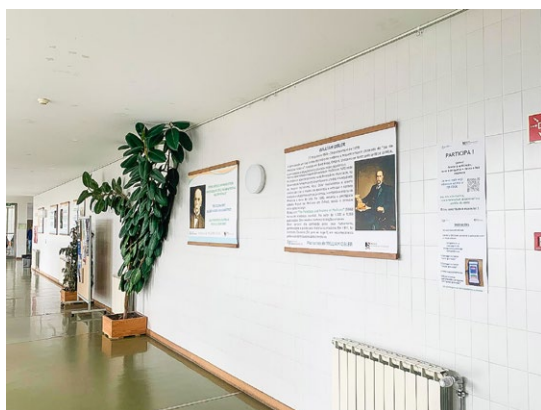


Fig. 1 – Perspective of the exhibition at the main corridor.

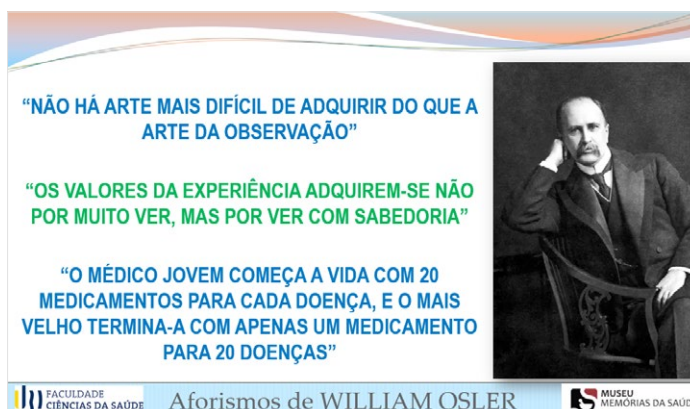


Fig. 2 – One of the posters include in the exhibition, including three Osler’s aphorisms, described in Silverman et al (2003): *There is no more difficult art to acquire than the art of observation / The value of experience is not in seeing much, but in seeing wisely. / The young physician starts life with twenty drugs for each disease, and the old physician ends life with one drug for twenty diseases.*



Fig. 3 – Call for participation by using QR code or, alternatively, a mobile phone.



Fig. 4 – Call for participation by using QR code or, alternatively, a mobile phone.

RESULTS

At the end of the exhibition, only six comments were recorded, two of which were from guests (and so not evaluable) and four were inappropriate (nonsense).

Along with periodic revisions, the existence of improper contents records assures the functioning of the system and, so excludes technical error.

CONCLUSIONS

The objectives of the experimental study had been fully achieved. The disappointing results should not be attributed to a local reason as, as Nina Simon (2010) wrote, “Over the last twenty years, audiences for museums, galleries, and performing arts institutions have decreased” and “increasingly, people have turned to other sources for entertainment, learning, and dialogue”. We chose a supposedly easier interaction using voice recording, which is one among other means of gathering comments, such as visitor books, comment cards, feedback boards and screens, website comments and social media comments (Winter, 2018). The rehearsed display model does not seem to have been attractive to students, nor does it seem to have attracted teachers and researchers, who have distanced themselves from it, which fits with the overall concept of a

putative excessive global (in)formative supply. From a doctrinal discourse to provocative actions, pedagogic tools are changing, and daily life shows differences in behaviour and affinities between cohorts with less than a decade of difference.

The authors’ perspective of contemporary students is that, when faced with a problem, they quickly seek a solution using internet platforms and then execute it very rapidly but without thinking deeply about the issue, resulting in a loss of opportunities for human interaction and for acquiring humanistic skills. In addition, a high degree of immaturity was perceived among those who responded, a behavioural profile that is inappropriate for those involved in health professional sciences and that reinforces the need to improve behavioural education in high schools.

PERSPECTIVES FOR FUTURE INITIATIVES

Except for high value pieces and documents, museums can no longer be felt as passive exhibitors (Falk, 2023) and this concept do apply nowadays for simple displays. This may explain the decrease in numbers of visitors to museums (Simon, 2010).

Curiosity is required along with tools to induce it. But how can we overcome the difficulties posed by current social communication dynamics?

Regarding Students:

- the viable formula seems to be to address topics that are part of the subjects under assessment;
- in order for training to reach its target, the recipient must be involved (Simon, 2010).

It is accepted that they are, but the expository models may not be suitable for the university student population, if we accept a passive attitude from this population.

Regarding Teachers and Researchers

- it will be advisable to involve them prospectively in the selection and production of the contents, which over time (it is hoped) will generate habits of participation

Regarding EVERYONE:

- to seek for more intrusive ways of inducing adherence and provoking curiosity.

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