

## Reflections on the Use of the Arts in Online CPE Seminars during the Pandemic

**Lauren Frazier-McGuin\***

### A SHIFT IN METHODS DURING A GLOBAL CRISIS

I joined ACPE's Arts in Spiritual Care and Education Community of Practice in 2019 and set incorporating the arts into my supervision as a goal for my professional growth. I had first experienced the use of images and reflection on songs and films as a resident under the supervision of The Reverend JoAnn Garma, EdD. In my own seminars as a Certified Educator Candidate and Certified Educator, I maintained her model of using a verbatim to invite students to draw images that encapsulated the theological themes of the visit. In 2020, I planned to move further into connecting artistic expression and theology by building entire seminars focused on film, art, and music. Baylor University Medical Center's library provided an excellent space to view movies with the students during class time. Our Sammons Cancer Center is home to an art studio that is open to Baylor's patients, visitors, and staff. However, the advent of COVID-19 and new concerns for the safety of our students shifted our seminars to an online format using Microsoft Teams. What would become of my seminar plans?

Over time, I became acquainted with the 2021–2022 first-year CPE residents' faces, voices, body language, and unique personalities via technology. The group was comprised of four students—a Filipina American woman in her twenties, a Korean American man in his thirties, a biracial Latino and European American man in his forties, and a European American woman in her forties. All of the students were from evangelical Protestant backgrounds, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. During their first two units, our "pandemic babies" were primarily supervised by my colleague while I worked mostly with the second-year residents. Because I trusted the arts would positively impact the

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\* Lauren Frazier-McGuin is an ACPE Certified Educator and CPE Program Manager at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, Texas. Email: [Lauren.FrazierMcGuin@BSWHealth.org](mailto:Lauren.FrazierMcGuin@BSWHealth.org).

CPE learning process, in preparation for the second unit of our four-unit program I continued with my plans to lead a ten-week theological integration seminar incorporating film, music, and the visual arts. In the first six weeks of the curriculum I designed, I planned to spend our weekly hour and a half engaging with films, music, and visual art I had chosen. Students would then share music and art they created or discovered that reflected the themes in a verbatim of their choice. For our final class session, I scheduled three of our center's staff chaplains who enjoyed creating paintings, poetry, and music to lead a chaplain artist panel dialogue with the students.

Based on my use of Garma's theological integration method, I hypothesized that there was a connection between the arts and our understanding of God. If we could close our eyes, reflect on visits, and create images to be drawn on a whiteboard to foster theological connections, we could surely experience the arts together and develop the students' abilities to reflect theologically as a group. In the progression from group reflection to real-time in-the-moment self-supervision, I hoped students would be able to access their own emotions, engage those of the care recipients, and provide effective interventions. Their enhanced awareness would not just happen in real time but would also manifest itself in the theological reflection portions of their verbatims, contributing to the students' understanding of their pastoral identities and their articulation of their theologies of pastoral care.

### **Seminar Planning: Use of Available Resources**

I had thought the online modality would be a barrier to the arts seminar, but, overall, I found it to be a benefit. I used a Google Play account and signed up the four new students as my "family members" for our focus on films. This connection provided access to videos in my library; they could watch movies on their own time on their own devices in preparation for class. Our first film, *A Ghost Story* (2017) starring Casey Affleck and Rooney Mara, is one of my favorites to watch and discuss with students because it provides an immediate jolt to our traditional ideas about grief and loss. Theoretically, it challenges our meaning schemes about these issues. Do ghosts grieve? Do we exercise free will after death? Where is God when we grieve? There are many points for reflection even in the ghost's physical appearance; the absurdity of his sheet-covered form is juxtaposed with the gravity of his experience and feelings. We had a lively discussion about the students' discomfort around this unusual story.<sup>1</sup>

With the students' meaning schemes and perspectives properly disturbed and shaken, we moved on to music.<sup>2</sup> Again, there were multiple options available online. I chose from a variety of popular artists, seeking diverse cultures and genres. I previewed the music videos on YouTube before class and searched lyrics on various websites such as [www.lyrics.com](http://www.lyrics.com) and [www.musixmatch.com](http://www.musixmatch.com). (I did not email the students the lyrics until a few minutes before the start of class so that we could view the videos and experience the songs together.) I chose a personal favorite as our first song: "St. James

Infirmary” performed by Doreen’s Jazz New Orleans. The blues classic was a fitting choice for a dialogue about our collective experience of grief. We studied the lyrics:

Folks, I’m goin’ down to St. James Infirmary,  
 See my baby there;  
 She’s stretched out on a long, white table,  
 She’s so sweet, so cold, so fair.  
 Let her go, let her go, God bless her,  
 Wherever she may be,  
 She will search this wide world over,  
 But she’ll never find another sweet man like me.<sup>3</sup>

With this close reading of the lyrics, I sought to jostle the priestly meaning schemes many of us carry within.<sup>4</sup> Is the second stanza a prayer of commendation? Can an intoxicated person give such a prayer? As a native New Orleanian, I easily connected to the song’s implicit assertion that anyone, including a poor gambler, has the power to bless, but some students were surprised and challenged by the idea. The song’s message pushed against their meaning schemes about holiness, sin, and religious authority. We enjoyed a lively dialogue about the act of blessing and who has the power to bless.

Our discussion of “Born in the U.S.A.” by Bruce Springsteen addressed the problematic use of a racial slur when describing the character’s service in Vietnam. Two Asian students shared their feelings about the term and stereotypes about Asians that are common in American society. One of the students also discussed South Korea’s involvement in the Vietnam War. He reflected on his own term of mandated military service and what it felt like for him to hold a gun in his hands, which he understood were called to help and bless others in ministry.

Our class ended with the triumphant “La Vida Es Un Carnaval” by Celia Cruz. The community in Cruz’s song cries out in defiance against poverty, pain, and disease—resisting by choosing to live with joy: “No hay que llorar / Todos podemos cantar.”<sup>5</sup> When I had first envisioned our CPE group’s engagement with the visual arts, I had hoped we would visit the Dallas Museum of Art. However, when we got to that point in the seminar curriculum, the high level of COVID-19 transmission in our community made an in-person visit to the museum inadvisable. Instead, we used the museum’s online virtual tour. I instructed the students to take the virtual tour and to choose a work of art to reflect on. They completed a theological reflection worksheet created by fellow community of practice member Mark Feldbush (see appendix A).<sup>6</sup> During our class time, students shared on-screen an image of the work of art they had chosen. They offered their impressions of the artwork and any theological reflections related to their experiences. The discussion provided further insight into the peer group’s life experiences and aesthetics.



Figure 1. Drawings created by the author and students on Microsoft Whiteboard. Per Garma's model, the students were asked to draw images that came into their minds after discussing key messages, spiritual issues, and theological themes in a verbatim.

At the end of the unit, students chose or created art or music that expressed the themes present in a patient encounter (see figure 1). The two students who chose to write poetry produced the most powerful works. Using her experience of providing a spiritual care visit to an elderly woman who was still grieving the loss of her own mother many years earlier, one student authored a poem about her grief over the loss of her own mother. The patient was lonely and did not want the resident to end the visit. The longing in the patient paralleled the student's longing for her deceased mother, which led to the student's poetic study of her own grief.

Sean Camarillo, the resident assigned to the Emergency Department, wrote the second poem. His verbatim described an encounter with a patient who had attempted suicide due to despair over her diagnosis of a debilitating neurological disease. Sean's poem reveals the depth of his connection to the patient and her suffering at a level that would not be evident in the typical evaluation and reflection portions of a verbatim. His strategic use of line breaks and punctuation to illustrate the patient's physical and emotional frailty is particularly poignant.<sup>7</sup> It is included here with Sean's permission.

"Inherited Condition"

Depression . . . Despair . . . Death.

Darkness surrounds me.

I walk down this path alone through the bogs into the deepest part of the valley.  
 Sinking deeper,  
     and deeper,  
     and deeper.

Why should I continue on? Why should I move forward?  
 Let me just lie down here.  
 Let my voice be deafened.  
 Let the world pass me by.

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My faith drops low,  
     lower and . . .  
         lower . . .  
             f  
             a  
             l  
             l  
             l  
             i  
     within the cracks.  
         g

My blood tells me I am created this way, I cannot escape it, I cannot change my path.  
 Why do I deserve this treasure?  
 Trust and faith are distant cousins whom I never see.  
 I've inherited this gift of extinction. It runs through my veins. It's always . . . with . . . me.  
 It will never leave me; it will not forsake me.  
 It will continue on through generation to generation to generation.  
 My life is poisoned and worthless.  
 If I lie down here, I can cut it off.

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I'm a house of cards, a broken bridge, a lost ship.  
 Fog is all around me. It smothers me.  
 There's no support for me. Just smoke and mirrors . . . smoke and mirrors.  
 A building without a purpose.  
 S~h~a~k~i~n~g and s~h~a~k~i~n~g.  
 Cast away to the side. Off the board and on the floor.  
 My only help comes from my fellow afflicted.

Unheard. Unseen. Unknown.  
 So, say your aphorisms and your prayers, and be on your way.  
 Let me lie down here in this place.

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I'm here to walk with you. I'm here to talk with you.  
 I'm here to listen to your story . . .  
 I will not offer false hope nor platitudes to ease my mind.  
 I'm here to support you on your journey.  
 I cannot understand your pain, but I see you and will empathize.  
 I cannot understand your future path, but I'll walk with you and wonder.  
 Why God why, I do not know.  
 But God sees you. God hears you. God knows you.  
 You are in God's hands.  
 Hold on. Press on. Keeping moving forward.  
 Step . . . by . . . step out of the thickness and into the river of life.  
 Living life while it's still in front of us.

#### STUDENT OUTCOMES

Student responses to the seminar were overwhelmingly positive; they often described the seminar as their "favorite." One student called the encounters with the arts "therapeutic." At first, I thought that their responses could be attributed to the fact that it provided a welcome break from reviewing book chapters and presenting verbatim reports. However, I soon noticed a positive change in their abilities to connect to theological themes, patients' emotions, and each other as peers, which was precisely what I had hoped would be the outcome of the seminar. The deep awareness of patients' emotional and spiritual needs, as reflected in Sean Camarillo's poem, migrated from their artistic responses in our seminar to their clinical encounters with patients.

One student was at an impasse with his educator (my colleague) at the start of the second unit. He could not access his own emotions and often left his patients' emotional needs unaddressed. However, thanks in part to the arts seminar curriculum, this student's personal and professional growth was evident at mid-year. He was able to articulate a strong sense of his pastoral identity and share his feelings and beliefs with enhanced clarity and confidence. He had progressed from a nominal understanding of the Level I outcomes to clearly demonstrating them verbally and in writing.

At the request of the residents, inspired by their engagement and progress, I agreed to bring the seminar back for the following unit. The student who had struggled during the previous unit presented a verbatim in which he provided exceptional pastoral

care to an elderly patient who could not remember whether he had been baptized. I attribute this student's transformative growth to the use of the arts in our curriculum.

There is much research on the importance of arts education for children. The success of the CPE residents points to the arts' powerful impact on adult learners as well. Catherine McGregor discusses the use of the arts in training leaders:

If students are exposed only to 'texts' that encourage dominant/preferred readings of events, processes or outcomes, then their learning is constrained by the affordances of the text. Yet if they are exposed to more 'open' texts, such as aesthetic modes—visual art, poetry, theatre/performance, fictional narratives, film and the like—where multiple readings are expected, even encouraged, then the potential for multiple/negotiated readings becomes greater. . . . In essence, exploring aesthetic texts creates spaces of possibility for novel actions and transformative thinking to emerge.<sup>8</sup>

The multiplicity of readings or responses to art that challenges students' meaning perspectives creates space for transformative learning. As students encounter aesthetic modes that challenge their worldviews, they are invited to creatively rebuild and expand those perspectives. They can imagine, try on, and experience different worldviews, allowing them the freedom to explore their own untapped emotions and risk inviting patients to do the same. The practice of standing in a film character's shoes, often a more familiar and instinctive way of learning than engaging in debate or dialogue, helps students to access empathy more quickly in the patient's room. Watching a movie about a character from a different culture becomes a practice in cultural humility, which then facilitates students' abilities to become culturally sensitive listeners and advocates in the clinic.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the many challenges faced by the 2020–2021 class of CPE residents, this group was one of the strongest and most successful our center has seen. Our inclusion of the arts in Baylor University Medical Center's CPE curriculum helped the students create powerful connections that kept them grounded in the chaos of the healthcare system and the world.<sup>9</sup> I ended each class period by thanking the students for risking this new type of learning that had taken us to raw and vulnerable places. I appreciate their trusting me enough to play, create, and feel in real time with their peers. I am forever grateful for the ministry they provided to our patients and staff in response.

Our center returned to in-person seminars in summer 2022. For the past two years, I have continued to offer arts-based theological integration seminars. Our center's emphasis on creativity and the arts has continued to provide transformative learning experiences for our CPE students.

## APPENDIX A

**Theological Reflection and Art Worksheet**

Name:

Artist:

Artwork:

Media:

Date of Reflection:

Instructions: As you wander through the museum, stop at the first piece of art that “grabs” your attention. Take your time (about 15 minutes) to study the artwork and respond to the following questions. You will present your chosen art to your peers.

**Briefly describe the artwork.**

**Describe what you observe in the artwork.** Is there anything unusual? Out of place? What is your eye drawn to? What is your eye drawn away from? How does the artist use light, shadow, color, movement?

**Describe the emotions that you notice.** What emotions do you observe in the artwork? What emotions do you notice in yourself? How do your emotions impact the way you look at the piece of art?

**What spiritual themes or messages are present in the artwork?** Does this correlate with your embedded theology? How does it invite you to deliberative theology?

**How does this piece of art relate to your spiritual care ministry?**

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Mark Feldbush gave permission to publish the worksheet here and for it to be shared for use by others.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> A recent discovery in television format is “May I Help You?” a 2022 Korean production about a funeral director who talks to her deceased clients. It provides many opportunities for dialogue about culture, death, faith and grief and is currently streaming on Amazon Prime.



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<sup>2</sup> Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1991), 44–50.

<sup>3</sup> J. Primrose, “St. James Infirmary,” [www.musixmatch.com](http://www.musixmatch.com).

<sup>4</sup> By using the term “priestly” I am referring to the sacred leadership roles of spiritual or religious leaders. With the students, I sought to confront their traditional ideas about holy women and men.

<sup>5</sup> English translation: “There is no need to cry / We can all sing.” Celia Cruz, “La Vida Es Un Carnaval,” [www.musixmatch.com](http://www.musixmatch.com).

<sup>6</sup> Theological Reflection and Art Worksheet, copyright Mark Feldbush, August 31, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Sean Camarillo, “Inherited Condition,” copyright 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine McGregor, “Art-Informed Pedagogy: Tools for Social Transformation,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 31, no. 3 (2012): 309–24.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful for the trust of my director, Chaplain Carlos Bell, who allowed me the freedom to embrace this new pedagogy and to run with it.