

253

Scaffolding the development of professional wisdom with literary fiction: A case from medical education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper describes medical students' reflections on the judicial handling of uncertainty in medical practice, as expressed during and following a literature seminar implemented in the third year of their medical studies at a Swedish university. The seminar was a mandatory teaching and learning activity, embedded in a professional development course, and based upon Mikhail Bulgakov's short story 'Baptism by Version' (2011). The theme of handling uncertainty, which relates to the moral, affective, and practical dimensions of professional wisdom, was identified as salient through inductive analysis of post-seminar interviews with students (n=11). The interviewed students' reflections fall into three sub-themes: The duty to reassure vs. the duty to own one's limitations; Accepting and overcoming uncertainty; and Regulating cognitive and affective conditions for practice. When the paper is presented in December 2025, the interview findings will be related to data from seminar observations (eight sessions, 141 students) and teacher interviews (n=4).

Full paper

Introduction

The notion that medical practitioners need to fuse technical skill and biomedical knowledge with a broader grasp of what constitutes and impacts health and well-being in humans is longstanding (Bain, 2018). However, pursuit of this ideal remains a challenge, which fuels a strong scholarly and pedagogical interest in finding ways to assert human holism, social complexity, and professional wisdom in medical education (Gordon, 2005; Chiavaroli & Trumble, 2018). This interest is sometimes framed in terms of resistance to a de-humanization of medical practice (Cole et al., 2015).

The medical humanities provide a platform for exploring the potential of using art, philosophy, and history in the service of humane medicine (Chiavaroli et al., 2019; Shapiro

et al., 2015). Within that context, the present study investigates *how medical students expressed and developed their understandings of professional wisdom with the aid of literary fiction* in a seminar implemented in the third year of their medical studies at a Swedish university.

Method

Using case study methodology (Merriam, 1998), the researcher collected:

1. Observation field notes from seminar sessions, in which medical students (n=141) engaged in a facilitated reflective discussion regarding Mikhail Bulgakov's short story 'Baptism by Version'.
2. Transcripts of semi-structured post-seminar interviews with students (n=11) and teachers (n=4).

This paper focuses on students' reflections on *the judicial handling of uncertainty in medical practice*. This theme, which relates to the moral, affective, and practical dimensions of professional wisdom (Bondi et al., 2012), has been identified as salient through inductive analysis of the post-seminar interviews with students. In December 2025, the findings presented below will have been embellished with complementary perspectives from teacher interviews and observation data.

About the case

The seminar was a mandatory teaching and learning activity embedded in a professional development course which followed upon a clinical placement period. In preparation for the seminar, the students were required to read Bulgakov's 'Baptism by Version' in *A Young Doctor's Notebook* (2011). The protagonist of the story is a young physician on his first posting in rural Russia, ca 1916. He is the only doctor of the unit and leads a staff of nurses, midwives, and a barber-surgeon. As the story begins, he is woken from sleep to attend a complicated birth. The young doctor has never seen anything like it and uses smoking as a pretext to run to his obstetrics textbook and try to figure out what to do. Meanwhile, the woman in labor and other staff wait in the delivery room. After a moment of bewildered reading, the protagonist decides that he must plunge in and navigate as he goes. The continued story describes the strategies and resources he employs to handle the situation, to the accompaniment of his inner monologue.

For the seminar, students were divided into groups of about 15 students. The primary facilitator was a literary scholar, who asked open questions about what students had particularly reacted to and reflected about while reading, as well as more targeted questions about students' thoughts regarding elements of the story. A medical practitioner acted as co-facilitator, pursuing implications for current medical practice.

Preliminary findings

The interviewed students' reflections on the judicial handling of uncertainty in relation to Bulgakov's short story fall into the following sub-themes:

The duty to reassure vs. the duty to own one's limitations: Was it right or wrong of the protagonist to hide his uncertainty, and with reference to what considerations? Here, students took different normative positions as they weighed the claims of e.g. leadership and patient safety.

Accepting and overcoming uncertainty: Students voiced that a significant aspect of the reading and seminar was arrival at a sense that uncertainty cannot be eliminated from medical practice, even by rigorous preparation, and that it is therefore not shameful. Some felt that their own experience corroborated a message they inferred from the story, namely that if uncertainty does not deter action, then action can mute uncertainty.

Regulating cognitive and affective conditions for practice: Drawing on the story and their placement experiences, students reflected that being open with colleagues about uncertainty may improve one's performance by (i) decreasing cognitive load and difficult emotions caused by the threat of losing face, and (ii) induce others to act and communicate in more supportive ways.

Consolidation with extant literature

The preliminary findings of this study add to an existing body of research regarding tolerance for and management of difficult emotions in medical education and practice (e.g. Barman et al., 2023; Lönn et al, 2023; Shapiro, 2011; Simpkin & Schwartzstein, 2016).