

Brains on Canvas: A Creative Night of Art Expression for Medical Students

May 24, 2018

It's May 24, 2018. The sound of brushes on canvas and scribbling pencils can be heard in the Northern Medical Program's (NMP) atrium at UNBC. Outside, a rainbow extends over the parking lot and a gentle rain falls on the building. Participants are gathered around tables amidst piles of old magazines, various paints and paper, and brushes (some of which are veterans to art events). You can almost hear the gears in their minds turning as they switch their scientific lenses for more creative ones. In the background, a projector flips between various thought-provoking images of paintings and sculptures with health and medical themes. The participants, mainly first-year medical students at the NMP, discuss the various provided art activities and how best to approach each one. Some engage with the art activities with an intensity similar to that of a surgeon during surgery. Others are more relaxed and lazily apply water and paint to canvas, the real focus on the promised pizza later on in the evening. You might be thinking "what on earth were those students doing?", and the answer is as follows. They were attending the Brains on Canvas art night, a FLEX project of some of their peers.

The Brains on Canvas art night was the result of UBC's FLEX curriculum, a mandatory research component of the University of British Columbia's Medical Undergraduate program for years 1, 2, and 4. The focus of the project was to assess how art expression could be used by medical students for de-stressing, self-reflection, and improving clinical understanding. The team included Dr. Constantin, Assistant Director of Anatomy with the NMP, and Charis Alderfer-Mumma, an Art Therapist with the Health Arts Research Centre. As well as ourselves, a few first-medical students: Daveen Panasar, Deanna Klonarakis, and Nick Brochez.

Participants volunteered a few hours of their time to partake in a night of art creation. We set up various tables with an assortment of art supplies to facilitate the creative process for students. Materials provided included acrylic paints, watercolour paints, drawing utensils, and magazines for creating collages.

We started the night by providing a structured warm-up activity for participants to try their hands at. We wanted to provide something more structured to begin with so those who were a bit less experienced in the creation process would have guidance and be able to try out some different techniques before creating their main art piece. The two warm-up activities we chose were inspired by neurology, so the medical students could create something familiar to them as neuroanatomy was recently covered in the curriculum. These activities included making cross-sections of brains using watercolours, as well as creating neurons by blowing around watercolour paint with a straw.

After the warm-up activities, we introduced three more involved art activities that students could trial. While the warm-up activities focused on getting comfortable with the process of creating art and the relaxation/de-stressing aspects of the creative process, these activities were more curtailed to facilitating self-reflection on experiences students have had

during medical school. This could include a clinical encounter, experience with a patient, a memory or experience related to medical school, etc.

The event was met with positive reviews. Many of the students found themselves pleasantly surprised with the pieces they created. If nothing else, they were pleased to step outside their comfort zone and try something new. Medical students tend to be perfectionists so many were hesitant at first, but as the night went on, they began to relax and just enjoy the process. We personally found it wonderful to have the support of our peers in making the event a success. Over 20 people came out to participate in the event, including some family members of students. We were a bit ambitious in terms of the agenda for the evening, as we quickly discovered that many medical students were so focused on the warm-up activities that they did not have enough time for the main activity. For future events, it would be best to come up with less involved warm-up activities and provide more time for the main ones, especially if the target audience is particularly oriented to details. We have created instructions for all of our art expression activities that are available on the HARC website. We hope that medical students and health care providers will use these as tools to help them self-reflect throughout their careers, or simply to help them unwind and relax.



-Daveen, Deanna, and Nick (NMP Class of 2021)