

Viola Strings and Other Troubles: Mentoring a Medical Student's Artistic Endeavors

By Erica Fletcher

Last summer, I attempted to replace a string on a medical student's viola. The peg was just a little too big and wouldn't fit properly into the instrument's scroll. What is more, there wasn't even a hole in the peg for the string to latch onto and remain in place. As I sat on my couch and stared at the empty space where the string should have been sandwiched between the other three strings on the viola's bridge, I felt *Tori*—my mentee watching nearby—become frustrated thinking about her unfulfilled aspirations to learn a piece by the end of a hot Texas summer, a grade she wasn't hoping for on her mid-term cardiovascular and pulmonary exam, stress from the impending deadline for her creative expressions project, and now this setback—the peg just wouldn't fit...

During the summer of 2013, I co-facilitated Creative Expressions Project (CEP) as a part of a rising second-year medical students' course in Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston (UTMB). As a rising third year PhD student at the Institute for the Medical Humanities, I found myself in a liminal space—about the same age as many of the medical students in our course but without my professors' many years of teaching experience. Moreover, this was my first opportunity mentoring medical students in artistic endeavors.

Drs. Jerome Crowder, a visual and medical anthropologist, and Anne Rudnicki, the Senior Medical Educator at UTMB's Office of Education Development, piloted the first Creative Expressions Project last summer with six medical students. The group met informally to talk about their art, and professors paired students with local artists who mentored them in a variety of crafts and artistic mediums. This summer, however, twenty medical students signed up for the five-week course, which has been integrated into the School of Medicine's Practice of Medicine (second year) curriculum as an elective; and providing mentorship and support for such a large class seemed like a daunting challenge for the course organizers.

On our first day of class, the medical students introduced themselves and talked about what they envisioned for their art pieces. Some had very set ideas, and others worked spontaneously, incorporating the ideas they received from discussions about their creative practices. After the class, students selected whom they wished to be their mentors, and I found myself working closely with four students for the next few weeks: two students collaborated on a dance video, one student—a photographer—worked on a digi-visual poem, and my final student, *Tori*, asked me to help her learn to play the viola and create a digital story about the process.

My days as violinist—performing in local youth orchestras and ensembles—were far behind me. I had given up practicing regularly in college, and to say that I found myself a bit rusty would be quite the understatement. Still, I agreed to mentor *Tori*. I figured the viola couldn't be too much different than the violin; and since she just wanted to learn the basics, I

thought I could at least help her get started on simple things—like learning to hold the instrument and bow, producing a steady bow stroke, and reading the C-clef.

My only other teaching experiences had been as an assistant for two other courses for physicians-in-training during the summer. CEP, however, proved to be a vastly different experience. Here, our discussions on medicine naturally arose from conversations in class and story circles, during which students would comment on each other's progress and make suggestions about potential artistic directions in the future. Here, I could meet with my students individually to talk about their progress, coach them on technique, and provide comments on their artistic endeavors.

I met with Tori a few times in the first couple weeks of CEP. I tuned her viola, a hand-me-down instrument from her sister. She told me about lugging around a double bass as a child, and we commiserated about being “orch-dorks” in high school. We chatted about graduate school, about living on Galveston Island, about our mutual friends... Unlike my past experiences serving as a teaching assistant, this experience felt much less hierarchical, more open and organic.

From sharing her project with others in a CEP story circle, Tori received the suggestion that she create a digital story of her process learning to play the viola. She readily agreed, and soon I was sharing my own digital story with her that I had made for a summer class and brainstorming ideas with her about how she could tell her story through this medium. Using iMovie on a Macbook, a point-and-shoot camera, and a three-stringed instrument (she didn't have time to order another set of pegs), she recorded herself playing the viola, giving herself pep talks in a bathroom mirror, and creating little speech bubbles in which her instrument talked back at her. We recorded her voiceover on my external microphone to accompany the photos and video she shot, and I gave her pointers on how to layer additional soundtracks on the video.

The result was quite a success. When it was time to present, Tori delighted everyone in our class by showing a very humorous video explaining her attempt at playing the viola. The peg didn't have to fit to make music. The creative expression, for her, was in the struggle, the process—accepting one's missteps and learning to make light of imperfections. As Tori posted in her CEP blog, “My desire to participate in this project is built on an overall desire to find balance and accept imperfection. I want to be an excellent diagnostician, but I also don't want to lose myself in pursuit of medical knowledge and caring for patients.” In my eyes, Tori certainly achieved her goal, and she taught me that mentoring isn't about playing “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” perfectly or about fitting a string on a peg, but supporting my student through the creative process and appreciating her accomplishments every step of the way.

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Photographs by Erica Fletcher



Figure 1: Creative Expressions Class meeting, August 2013



Figure 2: Tori (in the pink shirt) participates in a story circle, listening to another medical student talk about her project and offer feedback.

Tori S.
Student

9 Posts & Replies 2 Groups 0 Badges

Profile Overview >
Progress >
Activity >

7 Teachers

Activity
Posts Replies

Tori S. to Victoria

I've been working on my video story. The space for expression is endless, and I'm enjoying exploring my mind for all the possible ways I can express myself. I think what I bring to class tomorrow might be quite different from what I present on Monday. It will definitely be more rough and might show more emotion than I want to show to a larger audience. I feel comfortable sharing myself with the CEP community.

What a lovely community it is! I ran into Dr. Morey today at lunch and she reiterated something that Petra had said earlier this week. We just feel comfortable around our CEP peers. We have all self selected to take part in the project. It makes a huge difference to my enjoyment to be around people who are positive about what they're doing rather than feeling forced. Being appreciated by a group of classmates who I so admire also helps boost my motivation.

Figure 3: Our CEP class uses Edmodo, a website where students can upload their art, receive feedback from their mentors, and write about their experiences making art and doing medicine.



Figure 4: Tori edits footage on iMovie for her digital storytelling project.



Figure 5: Tori presents her video at UTMB's annual Bioethics Bowl.



Figure 6: Tori presents her video at UTMB's 2nd Annual Artistic Expressions Exhibit.