

Otherness, literature and health: an interdisciplinary approach¹

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of literature in interdisciplinary health studies broadens the understanding of the illness process, contributing to a broader view of the human condition and the role of the health professional. One of the curricular guidelines for Health Teaching brings the teaching of humanities, including literature as a way of overcoming the biomedical model, justifying that literary reading strengthens compassion, with an eye on otherness. The relationship between literature and health is fundamental to establishing a meaningful dialogue between the areas, involving a crossing of meanings, narratives and experiences, which recognizes language as a valuable therapeutic tool. In view of the above, the Faculdade Pernambucana de Saúde has been offering, since 2023, a Literature module for its students, presented here as a case report.

KEYWORDS: Academic training; Communication; Health; Literature; Otherness.

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Alteridade, literatura e saúde: uma abordagem interdisciplinar

RESUMO

A inserção da literatura nos estudos interdisciplinares da saúde amplia a compreensão acerca do processo de adoecimento, contribuindo para uma visão expandida da condição humana e do papel do profissional de saúde. Uma das diretrizes curriculares para o Ensino da Saúde traz o ensino das humanidades, entre elas a literatura como forma de superar o modelo biomédico, justificando que a leitura literária fortalece a compaixão, com o olhar para a alteridade. A relação entre literatura e saúde é fundamental para estabelecer um diálogo significativo entre as áreas, envolvendo um atravessamento de significados, narrativas e experiências, que reconhece a linguagem como uma valiosa ferramenta terapêutica. Diante do exposto, a Faculdade Pernambucana de Saúde oferece, desde 2023, módulo de Literatura para seus estudantes, apresentado aqui como um relato de caso. **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Alteridade; Comunicação; Formação acadêmica; Literatura; Saúde.

Alteridad, literatura y salud: un enfoque interdisciplinario

RESUMEN

La inclusión de literatura en estudios interdisciplinarios de salud aumenta la comprensión del proceso de enfermedad, contribuyendo a una visión más amplia de la condición humana y el papel del profesional de la salud. Una de las directrices curriculares de la Enseñanza de la Salud trae la enseñanza de las humanidades, incluida la literatura, como forma de superación del modelo biomédico, justificando que la lectura literaria fortalece la compasión, con la mirada puesta en la alteridad. La relación entre literatura y salud es fundamental para establecer un diálogo significativo entre las áreas, que implique un cruce de significados, narrativas y experiencias, que reconozca el lenguaje como una valiosa herramienta terapéutica. En vista de lo anterior, la Facultad Pernambucana de Saúde ofrece, desde 2023, un módulo de Literatura para sus estudiantes, presentado aquí como relato de caso. **PALABRAS CLAVE:** Alteridad; Comunicación; Formación académica; Literatura; Salud.

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Introduction

Understanding literature and its ethical and aesthetic aspects from the perspective of interdisciplinary studies, such as health education, can open up new possibilities for viewing the human experience throughout the evolution of society. As an instrument of communication and social interaction, literature plays a role in transmitting the knowledge and culture of a community. The relationship between literature and health is fundamental for establishing a meaningful dialogue between these areas, involving an intersection of meanings, narratives, and experiences, and recognising language as a valuable therapeutic tool (Carelli, 2020).

The National Curriculum Guidelines for health education, which outline the principles, foundations, and purposes of higher education systems, aim to provide comprehensive training for professionals, with a focus on interdisciplinarity and active methodologies. Graduates are expected to reflect on their practice, considering the diversity of human beings in their diagnoses, and to adopt a critical, reflective, humanistic, and ethical attitude (Brazil, 2014). One of the guidelines includes the teaching of humanities, among them literature as a way to overcome the biomedical model, justifying that literary reading strengthens compassion, with a view to otherness. It starts from a curriculum organised by active teaching-learning methodologies. The reality to be addressed by health students is complex, requiring comprehensive, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking (Peduzzi et al, 2013).

When analysing the effects of literature on the formation of more empathetic readers, a recent study points out that identification with literary characters has an impact on everyday interactions. This occurs because of literature's ability to transport us into the story and the minds of the characters. It is possible to learn about emotions by exploring the inner lives of fictional characters, transferring these experiences to real life (Denham, 2024). The development of many essential health skills for students, such as

good communication with patients, conveying bad news, and recognising patients' emotions, can be enhanced through the study of literature, which provides a way to rethink practice (Carelli, 2020). Each patient is endowed with their own complexity that goes beyond the limits of matter and is expressed through desires and feelings.

The health sciences, dedicated to the study of the human body, have invested in new methods of expanding knowledge based on a more humanistic view of the sciences in recent decades (Scliar, 2004), which contemplates the subjectivity of the individual. Expanding experiences in the humanities for those who care for others in the health fields is fundamental to the development of each person as a human being, and is a differential that enables an expansion of “being and existing in the world” (Heidegger, 2009).

Therefore, reflecting on the role of language and narrative related to health and disease issues helps us to deal with the human condition, pain, illness, death, as well as the figure of the healthcare professional as an active subject capable of listening, proposing and guiding the patient's behaviour. This important relationship has been the subject of studies and literary works in order to better understand the process of illness in society. Literature can strengthen compassion, with a focus on otherness and empathy (Candido, 2023; Denham, 2024; Scliar, 2004).

With the aim of exploring the intersection between otherness, literature and health in academic training, an optional literature module was launched in 2023 at the Pernambuco Faculty of Health (FPS) in Recife, offered every semester to health students at that institution. Each module, lasting 40 hours per semester, addresses issues related to this triad in different contexts. These characteristics can contribute to the training of future health professionals so that they can better listen to and understand the story told by the patient, helping them to understand what they often express in a confusing or fragmented way (Carelli, 2020).

As a form of knowledge, literature is a fundamental human right and one of the instruments of instruction, education and training, and

therefore access to it cannot be denied (Candido, 2023). According to the critic, this explains why in countries where education reaches higher levels of social quality than in Brazil, the basis of their educational system has always been the humanities. Hence the connection between human formation, humanism, the human sciences, and the study of language and literature. The FPS literature module is structured around the proposal of understanding literature in order to open up new possibilities for looking at the human experience from the perspective of the concept of otherness and its relevance to practice.

First, we will address otherness, taking into account its relationship with literature in the formation of the reader. Next, we will address the connection between culture and experience in health narratives. The debate will expand to praxis based on the case study of the literature module for health students, and will shed light on the importance of mediation in interdisciplinary academic training.

Otherness, literature and health

With the emergence of public health, which established itself as a scientific field throughout the 20th century, the biomedical approach came into tension with sociopolitical and environmental approaches, which were also considered in the process of illness. During this period, we can observe the emergence of some explanatory paradigms for the health-disease process based on the expanded concept of health, as a result of dimensions that go beyond the biological, including the economic, cultural, social, among others (Batistela, 2007).

Interdisciplinarity emerged in response to the complexity of today's world, with the aim of overcoming the fragmented view of the object of study imposed by the curricula used in most universities. It deepens the understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, and the construction of knowledge by the individual based on their own reality

(Frigotto, 2011). “Interdisciplinarity is a methodological process of knowledge construction by the subject based on their relationship with the context, reality, and culture” (Freire, 2001, p.135). Integrated health curriculum projects are part of this interdisciplinary strategy more focused on humanitarian practices.

One of the guidelines of **The National Curriculum Guidelines** for health education brings the teaching of the humanities to assist in reflection on the practice itself, with a reflective and ethical stance (Brazil, 2014). It is expected that future professionals in the field will consider the subject in their plurality. The vulnerability of human beings when they fall ill is perceived in the daily routine of public services. The limited capacity demonstrated by health professionals to understand the demands of users and the lack of space in hospitals drew attention to issues related to what has become known as dehumanisation in health, and resulted in several actions that culminated in the establishment of the National Policy for Humanisation Policy of the Ministry of Health, **Humaniza SUS**, which is important for the debate proposed here (Ministry of Health, 2011).

The signs of dehumanisation still present in the healthcare of the Brazilian population using the Unified Health System (SUS) – queues, neglect of people, inability to deal with suffering, discrimination, racism, unnecessary procedures, exclusion, and abandonment – highlight the importance of these issues in relation to Humaniza SUS (Pasche, 2010). The effectiveness of any humanisation programme will depend on the actors involved in the care of health system users, i.e., health professionals. Thus, it is essential to invest in academic training with the inclusion of arts education in general.

In the scenario described here, interdisciplinarity presents itself as the possibility for a new approach, since the deepening of scientific knowledge and technical advances are not sufficient to satisfy the range of possibilities that the health field needs (Gomes, Deslandes, 2004). Based on this principle, literature can stimulate creativity in health students, expanding their

imagination, as well as improving critical thinking and building a flexible vocabulary in accordance with different social classes (Carelli, 2016).

These characteristics can contribute to the training of future health professionals so that they can listen in order to understand the story told by the patient. Thus, understanding that literature and health have an important relationship is fundamental. Both deal with words, which are a therapeutic tool; and in the case of literature, a tool for aesthetic creation, in which parallels can be drawn between these different uses of words (Carelli, 2016).

For Ortega y Gasset (2021), it is not possible for an aesthetic object that is disconnected from people's lives to be understood as an artefact of pure artistic creation. This means that, for most people, the aesthetic pleasure that art deals with is the same as that found in everyday life, with all its power: human figures and passions. 'Art is a reflection of life; it is nature seen through a temperament; it is the representation of the human' (Ortega y Gasset, 2021, p. 33). Furthermore, literature acts in intellectual formation and promotes the humanisation of human beings.

By humanisation, I mean the process that confirms in humans those traits that we consider essential, such as the exercise of reflection, the acquisition of knowledge, a good disposition towards others, the refinement of emotions, the ability to penetrate the problems of life, a sense of beauty, the perception of the complexity of the world and beings, and the cultivation of humour (Candido, 2023, p. 198).

In healthcare, otherness is a fundamental value that allows bonds to be formed based on intercultural, empathetic and compassionate dialogue. It is related to the ability to perceive the Other as a unique and subjective person, recognising and respecting differences. Based on the mediation between language and otherness, reflective reading as an instrument of connection transcends the text by bringing together possible dialogues for the understanding of meanings and significances, as a means of uniting the

reader and the Other (Ricoeur, 1991; Sartre, 2008, 2019). As a “being in relation”, each individual has a body immersed in the world, for it is in the encounter with Others that the identity of the Self is constructed.

The presence of the Other is a possibility of recognition, as the subject is configured as the Other sees them (Sartre, 2008). However, although Sartrean individual constructs his identity in relationships with others, the meaning of his existence is established alone, as the direction he gives to his life is determined by his conscience and the exercise of his own freedom. Freedom thus brings constant suffering to the Self, reflecting on how interaction with the Other shapes its identity.

Sartre (2019) finds in literature a free unveiling of the meaning of the world through an imaginary object, in which the constitution of subjectivity and the affirmation of freedom occur, since human formation is not separated from the dimension of the imaginary. Literature is a moment of language and action, the art through which words are organised freely in order to give meaning to the world (Sartre, 2019). For the philosopher, each written word reflects the relationship between consciousness and the world. In this dynamic between creator and work, the reader plays a crucial role, as their gaze is fundamental to the formation of the literary object.

When analysing the constitution of identity through narrative theory, Paul Ricoeur (1991) proposes that literature serves as an ethical laboratory. It is a space for exploring relationships between the self and the Other, and therefore there is no such thing as a neutral narrative.

In this context, narrative becomes a means for the construction of identities, where the self is considered as an Other. The search for a personal identity is, therefore, a dialectical experience that involves reflection on difference and otherness.

By approaching reading as a cultural contact, based on otherness, the mere aesthetic appreciation of a text is surpassed. The expansion of the aesthetic concept includes cultural, psychological, alterity, and diversity dimensions. In this way, reading becomes an authentic experience of

connection with the Other (Ricoeur, 1991). This movement is fundamental to human development and can be a clue in the search for understanding how the being places itself in the world.

As a mechanism for approaching the Other, reading works to the extent that the reader/student moves between the text and its interpretation and perceives themselves as a resident in each of the texts. Otherness finds in literature an epistemological space of affirmation where the expression of minorities is possible, becoming a praxis of resistance, as is the case with feminist, black, and/or indigenous literature.

By allowing us to immerse ourselves in different perspectives and realities, books broaden our understanding of the Other. Through narratives, it is possible to feel and experience the experiences of others, which enriches interpersonal relationships. A study developed by Mar (2011) reveals that the more fiction people read, the better they identify imagined emotions. Research conducted in the United States revealed that metaphors involving texture, such as ‘The singer had a velvet voice,’ triggered the sensory cortex in readers, which is responsible for perceiving texture through touch — which did not happen when they heard literal phrases such as ‘The singer has a pleasant voice’ (Lacey et al, 2012).

Still on the impacts of reading on the imagination, fiction simulates a kind of social world that provokes understanding and empathy in the reader. It is during reading that the reader opens up to the experience. Furthermore, reading for pleasure has been recognised as a catalyst for several positive outcomes in life, establishing a connection between reading for pleasure and high levels of empathy (Djikic et al, 2013). Literature, as a form of knowledge construction, humanises a hermeneutic process, as some formal aspects of the text carry important information about the narrative universe (Carelli, 2016; Heidegger, 2009).

Furthermore, it enables mediation in order to expand its potential to manifest, as a form of knowledge, “the emotions and worldview of individuals and groups” (Candido, 2023, p. 189). This process of humanisation is related

to the traditional role of literature as an important educational tool. It is an intellectual and affective instrument that allows us to live values dialectically, even if in the form of fiction. When reading – or creating – a text, the reader/author not only comes into contact with a type of “given” reality; they configure – or reconfigure – this reality, (re)ordering it and thus giving it meaning (Carelli, 2016). Throughout the world, the teaching of the humanities has been adopted as a resource for the humanistic education of health students. Thus, subjects such as history, philosophy and literature have been incorporated into the curricula of undergraduate health schools, a trend that is beginning in our country.

A literary event in health undergraduate studies

In early 2023, The Pernambuco Faculty of Health (FPS), in Recife, launched an optional literature module, offered every semester to health students. Using active methodology, which encourages student participation, the aim of this module is to reflect on how literary narratives help us deal with the human dimension, including finitude, during the process of illness and death in contemporary society. Paulo Freire (2001) argues that education should promote critical, active, and creative citizens. To this end, it is not the mere reception of knowledge that will promote the development of skills, but action and the questioning promoted in the classroom.

Reading is an intelligent, difficult, demanding, but rewarding activity. No one reads or studies authentically unless they assume, when faced with the text or object of curiosity, the critical stance of being or becoming the subject of curiosity, the subject of reading, the subject of the process of knowledge in which they find themselves. Reading is seeking to create an understanding of what has been read. [...] Teaching reading means engaging in a creative experience around understanding. Understanding and communication (Freire, 2001a, p.269).

Drawing on literature, we explore narratives that intersect race, class, and gender, as well as subjective constructions—both fictional and

non-fictional—and their relationship to illness. The course consists of twenty semester-long sessions, each lasting two hours, with an average of ten students per semester. In class, we identify different forms of narratives and how they are constructed. Students explore the possible connections between literary narrative and the health-illness process, highlighting otherness in narratives and its relevance to culturally competent health practice. At the end of each semester, they are encouraged to produce a piece of free writing.

Literature has addressed the theme of disease, both realistically and symbolically, for centuries. Works dealing with illness, suffering, death, and mourning are crucial for reconnecting us with fundamental themes of the human experience. Literary language offers us access to these aspects, promoting a rapprochement with otherness, which is essential to the human psyche and the interrelationship between healthcare professionals and patients. Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, and Leo Tolstoy, for example, were some of the renowned writers who made illness a literary event. “[...] when we think of all this and infinitely more, as we are so often forced to do, it seems really strange that illness has not found its place, along with love, jealousy and battle, among the primary themes of literature” (Woolf, 2021, p.15).

Tuberculosis is one of the most explored diseases in fiction, notably in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (2016). The novel features Hans Castorp, who visits his cousin Joachim in a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps for treatment of tuberculosis. Over time, Castorp develops symptoms of the disease and prolongs his stay. During this period, he detaches himself from time, career and family, being drawn to introspection and death. The work suggests that the only way to deal with death is to understand it as part of life, rather than treating it as something separate. Susan Sontag (2007, p. 33) notes that illness is closely linked to Romanticism, being glamorised as “the artist's disease”, characterised by a melancholic and creative personality.

When addressing diseases and pandemics, literature offers a rich insight into how humanity has faced health crises over time, reflecting the

fears, social responses, and cultural changes generated by these situations. Texts that often reflect the fears, social responses, and cultural changes caused by these crises, as well as providing valuable lessons on resilience, solidarity and the human capacity to face adversity. Albert Camus' *The Plague* (2017) regained prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Originally published in 1947, the novel transforms the Algerian city of Oran, ravaged by the plague, into an allegory of the Nazi occupation of Europe.

In *The Stand* (2013), Stephen King presents a post-apocalyptic world in which a group of survivors face the consequences of a superflu that has wiped out 99% of the population. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (2009), by Leo Tolstoy, provides a reflection on the meaning of prolonged illness, as the protagonist evaluates his relationships and confronts the fragility of human existence.

In the literature module, we seek to understand the meanings of the process of illness from the voices of the subjects of the disease (patients) in fictional works. The narratives highlight how this experience can contribute to the improvement of clinical practice. The appropriation of diseases by books transforms the art of storytelling into a means of disseminating representations of illnesses, reaching metaphysical and abstract planes. During the meetings, fundamental principles of decolonial literature were also explored, such as the valorisation of local knowledge and resistance to colonialism³. We discussed how these principles can inform fairer and more equitable health practices within the Unified Health System (SUS). Below, some students from the module share their experiences. Students from different courses and periods were interviewed⁴. Namely:

³ According to Walter D. Mignolo, the decolonial model was founded at the moment when oppression of traditional peoples began, because within that oppression, there were ways to make it cease. These ways became evident when the energy of decoloniality manifested itself in Latin American peoples who “did not allow themselves to be manipulated by the logic of modernity, nor did they believe in the fairy tales of modernity's rhetoric” (Mignolo, 2007, p.27).

⁴ The real names were replaced with names of Flowers.

I found my experience very enriching, mainly because it addressed something that is not very common during a health course, which is literature. [...] What I liked most was the freedom to express myself during classes...Interpreting poems and quotations allowed all students to speak subjectively about what they felt when reading what had been brought by the teacher (Carnation, 4th semester of psychology).

[...] All this exchange between my colleagues was what enriched me the most. [...] I felt that during the module there was a revival of that old reader and lover of literature that existed in me in the past. I think that literature can help me both in my development as a doctor and in acquiring knowledge in various areas (Rose, 22 years old, 6th semester of Medicine).

My experience in the literature module was very special and important. In it, I learned about humanity, creativity, and also about incredible books and authors. I really enjoyed the discussion groups, where we discussed and read about various topics. I found it very interesting that everyone participated actively throughout the module [...] There was a lot of interaction, and I will certainly take the valuable lessons that the module taught me about humanity and creativity into my future professional life to make my daily work even more enjoyable (Tulip, 23 years old, 6th semester of physiotherapy).

[...] Taking literature classes during my undergraduate studies was very enriching in many aspects of my life. On a personal level, it was great because I was able to deepen my knowledge of literature, something I love, and experience moments of reading circles and learning about different literary periods and themes with other students from different areas of health. [...] From a professional practice point of view, I was able to relate literature

to my field of study. In addition to learning a little about the history of health from the readings, it is possible to create a greater understanding of realities different from my own, which is essential for good practice by health professionals. I can only be grateful for this wonderful opportunity. (Amaryllis, 8th semester Physiotherapy, 24 years old).

The students also analysed representations of health and illness in excerpts from literary texts, and how these challenge or subvert dominant narratives. The themes of health and otherness were actively discussed, based on readings and roundtable discussions, in the works of indigenous, Afro-descendant and/or other minority writers. They shared their own experiences and perspectives on how these themes might influence their future health practices. There were also collective readings of works by Brazilian writers such as Machado de Assis, Clarice Lispector, Guimarães Rosa, Ailton Krenak, among others, highlighting the characteristics of each author. Next, the literary texts, which were divided by theme, were analysed and interpreted.

To discuss racism and gender, for example, the students were guided by an analysis of texts by Conceição Evaristo and Grada Kilomba. In order to address indigenous literature, we read works by Ailton Krenak, Eliana Potiguara, and Geni Nunes. To discuss Brazilian literature, we read Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, and João Cabral de Melo Neto, addressing contextual regionalism but placing them on a universal level due to their literary characteristics. We also addressed contemporary African and South American literature. Literary movements and their main representatives, such as romanticism, symbolism, and modernism, were also discussed and contextualised in the meetings.

Final Thoughts

The FPS literature module has prompted important reflection on how the concepts of otherness and literature can inform and enrich students' healthcare practice. During these activities, students shared their own interpretations and insights, thereby enriching the collective discussion. They were encouraged to explore the diverse perspectives present in the texts and to reflect on how these narratives challenge or subvert dominant norms. Based on personal reflections on their own identities, privileges, and biases, recognising how these factors can influence their interactions with patients from different cultural backgrounds, they were encouraged to critically examine their own attitudes and beliefs regarding otherness and cultural diversity, and to consider how they can develop greater cultural sensitivity and awareness in their future healthcare practice.

The experience also provided the students with a deeper understanding of how otherness and literature can enrich their healthcare practices, enabling them to offer more culturally sensitive and socially just care in a variety of contexts. Writing has a transformative power to experience, understand emotions, and reflect on profound issues of illness, suffering, and death. Through narratives, characters, and imagination, literature teaches us about otherness, resilience, and the complexity of the human condition, strengthening our ability to deal with future challenges.

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