



PICTORIAL ESSAY 2: ART MEETS SCIENCE FOR BROADER MEDICAL EMPATHY

FLINDERS UNIVERSITY



Flinders University's art collection, first established as an academic resource for the visual arts in 1966, is being harnessed for teaching and learning in new and innovative ways. Known as object-based learning (OBL), the approach is an active and practical style of education that invites students to explore

ideas, meanings and knowledge in response to artworks. At Flinders, this practice has taken off in the College of Medicine and Public Health.

According to Flinders' Professor of Psychiatry Michael Baigent, it's what we can learn about ourselves that is making this style of learning so powerful. For the past four years, Professor Baigent has been bringing small groups of students in their penultimate year of medical school, during their clinical psychiatry terms, to the Art Museum to respond to a set of questions in relation to the artworks.

Left:

*Kunmanara Tjilpi Kankapankatja
Walalkara ngura (Walalkara country) 2008
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Flinders University Art Museum Collection
4583
© the Estate of the artist and Kaltjiti Arts*

Right:

*Flinders University Art Museum Director
Fiona Salmon with Professor Michael
Baigent. Photo credit: Brenton Edwards*



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‘Students learn where to find a pulse, how to examine a patient and even how to communicate. But to develop their professionalism as doctors we need to examine the spaces “in between” such as empathy, cultural awareness and self-reflection,’ says Professor Baigent. ‘We can do this by using observations of art.’

OBL engages the senses and accommodates different learning styles while complementing digital, lecture and text-based teaching approaches.

‘Drawing on strategies of active looking and open-ended thinking, OBL encourages deep involvement in the topic and exposes students to complexity, ambiguity and differing points of view,’ said Flinders University Art Museum Director Fiona Salmon.

‘The process enhances observation and communication skills as well as lateral and creative thinking’.

Professor Baigent was first introduced to using art objects to teach medical students on a visit to Harvard University in 2012. On return to Australia, Professor Baigent introduced the process to his psychiatry students who responded to works in the Flinders University Art Museum.

‘As a psychiatrist, it was easy to apply the approach and facilitate discussions on the tricky topics. Others’ views are heard and considered in an environment where the students feel safe to disclose their thoughts. The students also enjoy the change in environment, moving away from

the hospital to the museum setting and the creativity involved in the exercise.’

In 2016 Professor Baigent was part of a research project led by the Art Museum exploring OBL as a strategy for improving student outcomes. The project was in collaboration with museum director Fiona Salmon and Flinders colleagues Dr Catherine Kevin (History) and Vicki Reynolds (Humanities and Creative Arts), along with Dr Heather Gaunt from Melbourne University.

While acknowledging it is difficult to measure the impact of OBL, Professor Baigent is enthusiastic about its value in the context of a medical degree, the way it has been embraced by his students, and the benefits it might have on their practice.

‘What impact does being a more self-reflective, empathy-aware and happy doctor have? It can only be a positive one.’