



The Universal Language of Literature and Emotion: The Therapeutic Journals Soul and Perspectives, Confessions of Young Doctors

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Abstract

The paper analyses the connection between the universal language of literature and emotion, by referring to the volumes *Soul and Perspectives- Confessions of Young Doctors*: a therapeutic journal, the first journals from this category ever to have been published in Romania by 500 medical students at the "Victor Babeș" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Timisoara. It was a 4 year project that started in the year 2020 and was completed in the year 2024. The complex and heartfelt project was first documented on-line via classroom and put together as an experiment for one year. When the on-line success of one class of students in dental medicine offered positive feedback, the project was extended to multiple classrooms with students studying general medicine, dental technicians and multiple categories of medical caregivers. It was finally put on paper and launched for future generations of young doctors to be able to have a glimpse of how is it to be a freshman in medicine. The journals are dated, so that we can state it is a highly well documented archive of human experiences. The volumes *Soul and Perspectives, Confessions of Young Doctors*: a therapeutic journal, share private thoughts on student life, personal insights on what it takes to become a student in medicine, as well as an original gallery of images selected by the students, art works that the students have worked at, by themselves.

keywords: soul, empathy, perspectives, diversity, originality

1. Introduction

This work represents a large project spanning over 4 years, with the project starting in October 2020 and ending in April 2024. In April 2024 the last paper was uploaded to classroom, submitted and included in the project *Büchse der Pan...demie* or *The Pan...demic Box*, as this therapeutic journal was originally called. Inspired by the pandemic experience, in April 2021, the students in medicine from the "Victor Babeș" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Timișoara, Romania began writing their thoughts in an online document, an atypical Pandora's box, which they were to open on graduation day. This project was born from the ideas of the first brave people to open the pages of a virtual *therapeutic journal*.

The article primarily uses the interdisciplinary method. Secondly, the comparative method is also approached in order to compare the therapeutic journaling in medicine with other forms of narrative medicine. Ultimately, the paper appeals to the hermeneutic and text immanent methods in order to get as close as possible to literary therapeutic journaling.

More than 42 students (the target group) from dental medicine wrote in the journal in the first few months of opening the online page. Some of the writings do not appear in the volume as they are confidential. People that had left us too soon, stories of young adult lives, stories that seem straight out of fiction yet painfully real. We understood that the project had a therapeutic effect when one student described how much this journal helped her in overcoming a personal traumatic event.

We talked about this project with the students entering medical school the following year and interest in the journal grew. After the pandemic, they needed to confide in someone, confidentially or not, to know that they had laid a brick in the student community, of the Victor Babes University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Timisoara, Romania. The title was changed and Pandora's Box opened like a bridge across time, a message between the first-year student and their sixth-year self who would read the message minutes before graduation. Pandora changed its appearance and was renamed, but retained its identity, its uniqueness, its courage, and the general medical students joined the project in 2022. Second-year students followed, and the community grew, with hundreds of medical students putting their thoughts into an original journal created in cyberspace.

Their words, their unique yet similar experiences, united them like an imaginary network. The young doctors wrote in Romanian, but also in German, English, as they saw fit. It was and still is an imaginary arch across time. It is also an innovative and unique project, because it is the first therapeutic journal written by students in three different languages.

In 2023, students took up writing again, constantly, in their soul- journal and finally finding their balance and hope. The box opened, in 2024, when the last writing was added to the volume, illuminating corners of the souls of young people who will heal the patient's soul and body and yes, this project, has turned us into a community, a family. The works are dated and bear the first names of the authors; they are real confessions, honest, original and courageous confessions.

Could one put his/her life or a part of it on paper? These young adults did it not so much for themselves as for the young doctors who will come after them, with their fears, anxieties, joys, the freshmen to whom they convey through this diary the message that everything will be all right, no matter what, that they will always find their balance. Most of the writings have key words that open up hidden recesses of the soul or underline the essence.

The journal is a powerful tool in narrative medicine. It acts as a therapeutic tool, helping with emotional healing and self-reflection. It offers a safe space to share thoughts and feelings. This allows writers to gain clarity and process their emotions. It also helps them explore solutions to personal challenges. It's a tool for personal growth.

A therapeutic journal is a special place for self-reflection and healing. It helps one process thoughts and manages stress, even traumatic events or events perceived by the subconscious to be of high impact. It's a useful skill and tool to connect with your inner self. Unlike a regular diary, a therapeutic journal focuses on your emotional well-being. It's all about mental health and offering a secure place to embrace healing of the mind and soul¹.

However, our purpose was not only to offer comfort and emotional healing to the writer, but in my experience as a clinical psychologist, we noticed that more than 50% of the people that come into the practice heal their inner self by being assured they are not the only ones experiencing a problem- when you feel reassured that you are not the only one going through torments, you know there is a normality where you fit and that you can get better. Anxiety is

¹ <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/therapeutic-journaling> [8.01.2025]

to be avoided. Creating a safe place is essential, safe even referring to a community that even if doesn't know you, understands what you're going through.

This is the purpose of the journal. Creating a community that is there for one another, like a web that is in permanent communication and will also be there for one another. Mircea Eliade, the famous Romanian writer and philosopher, once said that if we listened carefully to each other's stories, we would write the best book of the world. It is our belief as well, that our personal histories, our stories, web the most beautiful reality one can render.

In Romanian, English and German, this project, which began timidly, brings together hundreds of pages, from which I have extracted the essence of student feeling, the essence of the tumult of generations of medical students, my beloved students. Their voice is a universal voice, the voice of students everywhere, at the beginning of their journey.

1.1 Definitions and Objectives of Therapeutic Journaling

The methodological approach of the paper requires clarification of the notions of therapeutic journaling. Therapeutic journaling is according to the VA Office of Patient Centred Care and Cultural Transformation 'the process of writing down our thoughts and feelings about our personal experiences. This kind of private reflection allows us to sort through events that have occurred and problems that we may be struggling with. It allows us to come to a deeper understanding about ourselves, with a different perspective on these difficulties. Therapeutic journaling differs from more traditional diary writing, which involves recording the details of daily events. In contrast, therapeutic journaling is an internal process of using the written word to express the full range of emotions, reactions and perceptions we have related to difficult, upsetting, or traumatic life events. Along the way, this process can mean writing ourselves to better emotional and physical health and a greater sense of well-being.'²

Writing a therapeutic journal, journals in our case develops into a powerful mechanism to write down our thoughts and feelings. It helps us deeply understand and deal with big life events and on-going challenges. By sharing our feelings, we learn more about ourselves and our behaviours. This practice is different from just keeping a diary. It channels on our inner feelings, like anger, sadness, or joy, especially when we face tough times. It helps us feel better emotionally and physically, leading to a stronger sense of well-being.

There are many ways to start to use a therapeutic journal as a healing method. One can choose, for instance, to write regularly about things that make us feel strong emotions. This can include writing about loss, stress, or big changes in our lives. It also helps us deal with stressful or traumatic events by giving us a safe space to face them. Dr. James Pennebaker's³ expressive writing protocol is a well-studied method. It involves writing about a stressful or emotional experience for three to five sessions. This helps us explore and understand our feelings better. Studies show it can be very helpful on its own or with other therapies.

Writing about our feelings is the key to our health. It boosts our immune system. When we face hard times, it's hard to process them fully. This can trap our emotions and memories, affecting our health.

Expressive writing helps us release these trapped feelings. It lets us make sense of our experiences. This process helps us heal emotionally and understand our place in the world. Over 25 years, research has shown writing about tough times improves our health. Dr. James Pennebaker's studies found it can increase stress responses but also improve health long-term.

² <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/docs/Therapeutic-Journaling.p1> [19.01.2025]

³ Pennebaker, J.W. (2004). *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering From Trauma & Emotional Upheaval*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications

Pennebaker⁴, who first investigated therapeutic journaling for traumatic events, but later expanded the focus to general emotional events or specific experiences, states that what makes writing therapeutic is that the writer openly acknowledges and accepts their emotions and becomes able to give voice to his/her blocked feelings and to construct a meaningful story in a safe environment. A meta-analysis by Smyth⁵ found many benefits, including better physical and mental health.

Frisina et al.⁶ also performed a meta-analysis on writing about emotions in clinical settings. They found it helped people with medical illnesses but not those with psychiatric issues. These studies show writing is a powerful tool for healing and improving health.

In 2012, a key study by Emmerik, Reijntjes, and Kamphuis⁷ showed expressive writing helps with post-traumatic stress. This includes acute stress disorder and PTSD, along with depression. The study found big drops in stress and depression symptoms right away. Writing therapy was just as good as trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy. Smyth's 1998 review also highlighted the benefits of writing down emotions. It found these benefits are as big as many other psychological treatments, which can be long and sometimes do not provide the efficiency needed.

Therefore, expressive, creative writing is a strong, proven treatment for stress and for writing down, in a therapeutic manner the problems that we face. Writing a therapeutic journal is a good way for people who don't want or can't do traditional therapy. But, it's not for everyone. It might not work for those who have trouble expressing emotions or have severe trauma or mental health issues. However it was not the case at our university, within our group of writers. To my surprise the journals helped free students by confiding about personal grief, death of loved ones, anxiety, eating disorders and on the opposite confessional pole- love, friendship, methods how to overcome hardships and carry on, advice to younger colleagues and so on. Every single writing is dated; we have a large archive of human feelings, as well as a legit and authentic document. The visual impact is powerful; each journal page comes with a personal visual image chosen by the author of the journal.

Approximately 100 students are now registered on the website and 54 have already submitted their paper, alongside a visual image. They write in Romanian, German, English, but also Hungarian, French. For us, the high interest in a third volume, a third therapeutic journal, comes as a confirmation that we are on the right therapeutic path and that our tool is an useful one and can become an useful therapeutic tool to students regardless of their university.

⁴ Pennebaker, J.W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychol Sci.* ;8(3):162-166

⁵ Smyth, J., Hockemeyer, J., Anderson, C., et al. Structured writing about a natural disaster buffers the effect of intrusive thoughts on negative affect and physical symptoms. *Aus. J of Disast Trauma.* 2002;1:2002-2001.

⁶ Frisina PG, Borod JC, Lepore SJ. A meta-analysis of the effects of written emotional disclosure on the health outcomes of clinical populations. *J Nerv Ment Dis.* 2004;192(9):629-634.

⁷ Van Emmerik, A.A., Reijntjes A., Kamphuis, J.H. Writing therapy for posttraumatic stress: a meta-analysis. *Psychother Psychosom.* 2013; 82(2):82-88.

Voi fi prezent(ă) la întâlnire

72 responses



● Da
● Nu pot ajunge la această întâlnire, dar îmi doresc să iau parte la aceste întâlniri.

Figure 1. Table of participants present at the launch of the platform- Imagination, Confessions of Young Doctors: a therapeutic journal

Anul de studiu

72 responses

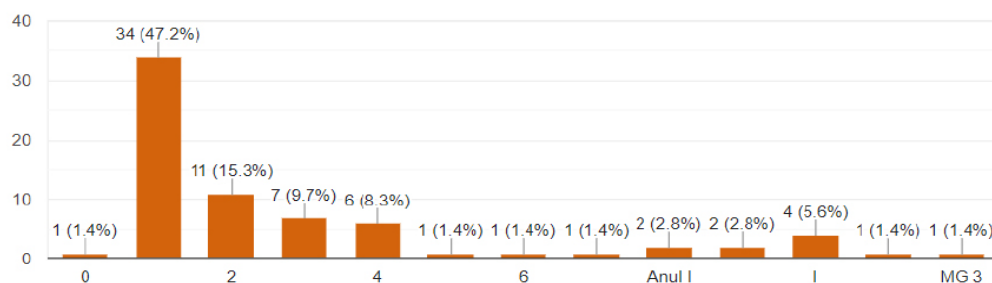


Figure 2. Live@the Museum-Study year and medical research field of the participants⁸



Figure 3. Live@the Museum-Official launch of the platform⁹

⁸ <https://www.umft.ro/ro/19-11-cups-of-art-live-the-museum/> [8.11.2024]

⁹ <https://www.umft.ro/ro/19-11-cups-of-art-live-the-museum/> [8.11.2024]

2. Integrating the Therapeutic Journals within a Cultural Context

The project of creative, therapeutic writing was integrated in 2024 in the cultural mediation background that was implemented in March 2022 at the Victor Babes University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Timisoara, Romania. The activities run through the cultural mediation programme have as a common value, the need of introducing students in medicine to the cultural environment, to cultural activities, cultural programmes, closer to understanding artists, writers and building up a community within the university.

Romanian and international medical students were invited to take part in Live@ the Museum, a cultural mediation programme¹⁰. The results shown below were collected via Google forms, through a quantitative and qualitative analysis.

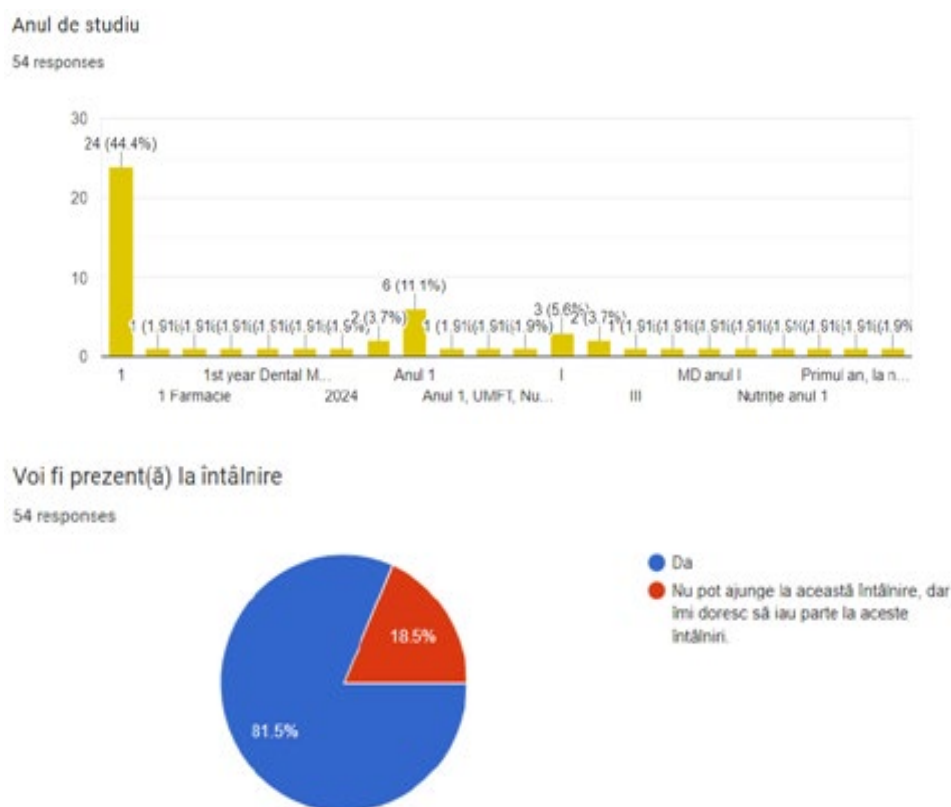


Figure 4. Participation form including number of participants, attendance list- First edition- Live @the Museum

The subjects discussed within the cultural mediation programme engage into sensitive topics such as women rights, women doctors, pathology, artists –doctors and vice versa, mental health, disabilities of the body, digital art, virtual memories, Klimt explained in documentaries, discussions in cinemas-cinematography and so on. The subjects are chosen from a feedback we gather from participants as well as from the cultural, social and psychological environment that surrounds us, from our constant need to satisfy our cognitive and aesthetic needs.

The importance and new perspective of the cultural mediation within our university as well as creating the therapeutic journaling project, was bringing together students and medical practitioners, students from fellow universities and creating motivation towards art and all artistic content, as well as towards self knowledge and acceptance.

¹⁰ <https://www.umft.ro/ro/actiuni-culturaleumft> [8.11.2024]

What should be of great importance is that we managed to launch two important self development volumes- the two therapeutic journals written by 500 students in the field of medicine- *Soul(I) and Perspectives (II) Confessions of Young Doctors, A Therapeutic Journal*, written in three different languages- English, German and Romanian, rendering personal perspectives on life and art, as well as letters to future colleagues.

The journals are the first of this kind written by medical students from the 1st and 2nd year, a four year project, which was successfully integrated in the cultural mediation¹¹ programme and has received positive attention from the Romanian press¹². They are available as well, on an accessible platform, via classroom, where students have free access to the volumes and can bring their own contributions as well. It was a difficult mission to convince students that extracurricular activities are an integrant part of an individual's formation as a future intellectual.

If we think back at Maslow's pyramid of needs, it is the cognitive and the aesthetic needs that must be integrated and transformed, metaphorically speaking into basic needs of an individual.

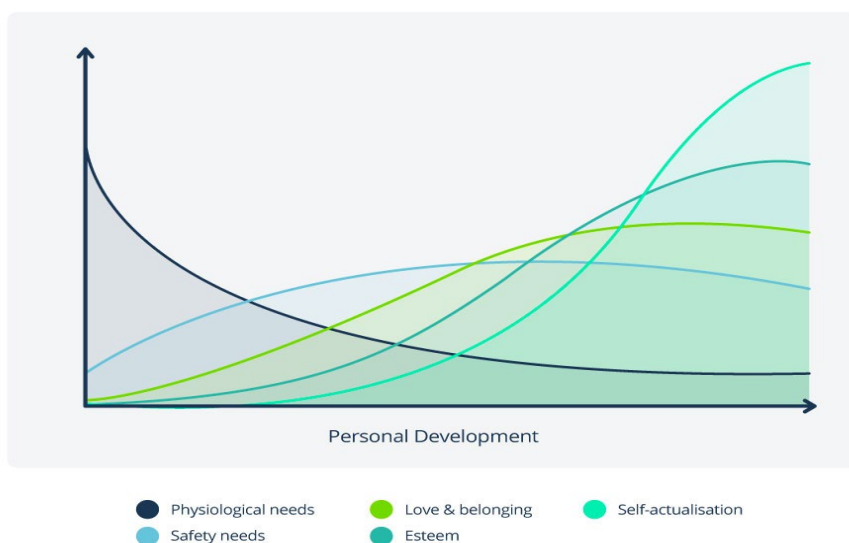


Figure 5. Maslow's pyramid of needs¹³

We tried and succeeded to bring to workshops students from different cultures, environments, and fields and created not built, but created a true artistic community at our university. Moreover we managed, to create characters, to facilitate community dialogues, raise accessibility of visual art, and focus our study on culture, forms of understanding the world around us, our community and shaping the way the young generation views art in today's digital social and behavioural context.

It was Victor Brauner's exhibition on surreal art turned my students into an active community. After this encounter, we organised a workshop on *Art and Pathology* at the same location, The National Museum in Timisoara. Medicine residents, teachers, as well as doctors joined, and students proved that they can examine art paintings as well as they can examine patients.

The key word within each and every workshop was and is to this day the active collaboration and active participation. As a teacher, I try to encourage my students to embrace their

¹¹ <https://www.umft.ro/ro/pastila-de-sanatate-500-de-studenti-medicinisti-co-autori-la-2-volume/> [25.05.2025]

¹² <https://www.impactpress.ro/2024/05/25/lansare-de-carte-la-universitatea-de-medicina-si-farmacie-din-timisoara-soul-perspectives-confessions-of-young-doctors-a-therapeutic-journal-p/> [25.05.2025]

¹³ <https://www.growthengineering.co.uk/maslows-hierarchy/accessed> [8.01.2025]

individuality and uniqueness, think freely and express themselves with no barriers, leading them to pursue their passions and challenge what society expects them to do.

This journey transformed and manifested into the two therapeutic journals, into over 500 confessions, both personal confessions, awakenings of their conscience, renderings of harsh realities, perspectives on courses, The journals Soul (I) and Perspectives (II) - Confessions of Young Doctors offer valuable insights into the transformative power of art and the power of the individual's strength to overcome barriers of mental health, loss, grief, substance abuse, depression, anxiety.

Every journal page does not glimpse pathology, but is written in the manner of a confession in which the writer confesses to have undergone the problem, does not confess to have healed, but hopes to help another facing the same turmoil. The journals are not only confessions of the downsides of student life, but are nevertheless realities that need to be seen and said. We all know a student's life in medicine is tough because of the exams and the difficult classes, but there is no support group for the young adults, that rarely go and see the university's psychologist.

When reading the journals, that are available on an online platform, where other students can read the books, identify with the same situation and find a tool for actual healing. There is no cost involved; one can enter the platform just by adding an email address, so confidentiality on both sides- reader and writer is ensured. Therefore this is the simplest form of cultivating trust, confidentiality and empathy. As mentioned before, there needn't be made a reference only to the pathological, but there is a real support and real results in the access towards the online page of the journals. This is an efficient method of building up a community within a university. It can be called the most efficient mediation programme, more than cultural, it is HUMAN.

3. Results and Conclusions

Narrative writing and channelling stories were integrated within the cultural mediation programme that we organised together with the active participation of students. It is important to mention this aspect as well because, although the project started in 2020, long before the mediation programme was implemented at our university, it was important to embody it into the cultural mediation programme in order to gain media visibility and in order to gain more visibility within the university, for students and their writings.

Currently, the third volume- *Imagination, Confessions of Young Doctors: a therapeutic journal* is under work. The unique and defining trait of the volume is personal understanding: who we are and what is our story. Empathy is cultivated throughout the three therapeutic journals, encouraged and we clearly make a difference to compassion and one's need to identify with the other's problems, with the need to heal and help.

The project and the two journals were presented at the conference in Paris¹⁴. The purpose of the confessions was and is to connect students and future students and reach as many countries as possible. Writings are archived via classroom, therefore making it easier to interact. Since the new classroom was launched, where readers and writers were supposed to get the free copies of the journals, as well as bring in a new confession of their own, 64 students joined the classroom in the 1st hour, making it the most successful project of all our mediation actions. The project- the two therapeutic volumes, underline the importance of student community and support, as well as multiculturalism, diversity, interculturality and respect towards human feeling. The success of the project lies in its originality, as well as innovative approach towards writing a therapeutic journal.

¹⁴ https://www.hpsconf.org/december-2024_-paris/ [3.12.2024]



Figure 6. Official launch, poster, of the volumes, May 2024¹⁵

Acknowledgment(s)

This paper is an output of the project implemented in bold partnership, true creativity and collaboration with the students of the Victor Babeș University of Medicine and Pharmacy Timișoara, Romania, so it would be without any doubt that I would offer all my acknowledgements to my students and to Alexandru Olaru-Poșiar, my son, the designer of the graphics of the books, of the structure of the two journals- two separate books seen as one, part of a unifying concept- Soul and Perspectives or Soul Perspectives. Compared to the human soul, the confessions can be read individually, but cannot be separated. It was his idea and the work of my students that have become a generator of energy and creative collaboration among students from different academic years, different universities, students who are about to choose medicine, students that have just started to bring their contribution to the 3rd volume- *Imagination (III)*, *Confessions of Young Doctors: a therapeutic journal*, as well as to numerous generations of students that will continue writing, in order to empower and inspire others by sharing human experience on paper and through image.

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