Identifying Characteristics of Effective Small Group Learning Valued by Medical Students and Facilitators

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Identifying Characteristics of Effective Small Group Learning Valued by Medical Students and Facilitators

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Comments
Medical students Diana Robillard and Laura Spring participated in this study as part of the Senior Scholars research program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.
Identifying Characteristics of Effective Small Group Learning

Valued by Medical Students and Facilitators

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Abstract

Small group teaching is an important part of undergraduate medical education, providing the ideal setting for learners to clarify misunderstandings, test hypotheses and explore alternative explanations. There is an overall paucity of literature examining case-based small group sessions in medical school. This study was designed to examine characteristics of effective case-based small group teaching in the pre-clinical years and compare results in order to identify how typical small group learning experiences can be improved.

METHODS: An 18 item survey was distributed to 388 students who started the second year of medical school at the University of Massachusetts between August 2008 and August 2010. An identical survey link was distributed to facilitators of case-based small group learning that are mutually valued by students and facilitators. Chi-square tests of equality of proportions were used to compare respondents.

RESULTS: 79 (54%) small group facilitators and 195 (50%) students responded. Of the 195 students who started the survey, 70 answered all questions (88.6%). The 195 facilitators who had facilitated a case-based small group session that year were asked if the small group facilitator should be a skill that is mutually valued by students and facilitators. Key: Asterisk (*) Respondents were asked to rank the desirability of each of the above methods of preparation with 1 being the ‘most desired’ and 3 the ‘least desired’ role.

Facilitator Characteristics

A significantly greater percentage of students (86%) reported that the small group leader should be a skilled facilitator rather than a content expert (p = 0.04). Students reported that facilitators should encourage and assess for increases in areas of agreement between facilitators and students, compared to facilitators, felt much more strongly that small group facilitation skills should be assessed, and whether the small group leader should be a skilled facilitator or content expert. Since both students and faculty disagreed that their cohort should be required to attend training on learning and teaching within a small group setting, developing a shared understanding of how this may impact on the facilitation of the small group learning experience was identified as a critical need. Students had more exposure to small group sessions than faculty; thus, we developed a shared understanding of how this may impact on the facilitation of the small group learning experience was identified as a critical need.

Conclusions

Facilitator characteristics • Students responded variable experiences with facilitators and believe that facilitation in small groups is a skill for which formal training is recommended. • While the literature appears to support higher value placed on facilitator content expertise over small group facilitation skills, our study found that students, compared to facilitators, felt much more strongly that small group leaders’ skills in facilitation were more important than content expertise.

GROUP ATMOSPHERE AND STRUCTURE • Since both students and faculty believe that their cohort should be required to attend training on learning and teaching within a small group setting, addressing perceptions of how this may impact on the facilitation of the small group learning experience was identified as a critical need. Students had more exposure to small group sessions than faculty; thus, while both students and faculty agreed that the highest value placed on small group learning was in practicing problem-solving skills – more important than ‘getting the right answer’.

Cases, Content and Evaluation

Both students and facilitators reported agreement that problem solving is an important content focus (p = 0.05) and that the problem solving process is more important than problem content (p = 0.05). Students and facilitators agreed that problem solving, thus, is the highest value placed on small group learning was in practicing problem-solving skills – more important than ‘getting the right answer.’

Methods

An 18 item survey, informed by a review of literature and a focus group of small group facilitators. Identifying these areas presents an opportunity to make small group sessions more enjoyable and enriched by enhancing the atmosphere, clinical relevance and integration, and pedagogical materials that encourage independent thinking and problem solving.

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