

Chapter 8

Fundamentals of Interprofessional Communication:

A Case Study of an Online Facilitated Learning Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the development, implementation and evaluation of a module on interprofessional communication skills that incorporates principles of problem-based learning, delivered entirely online. Learners focus initially on foundational concepts of relationship and patient centered care, the importance of self awareness and understanding their own professional values and biases, progressing towards teamworking to develop common patient care goals. The module faculty facilitator is essential to role model and foster interprofessional collaboration. Qualitative content analyses of discussion board postings across 29 students, supplemented by small-scale in-depth interviews and a focus group, reveal they are able to learn interprofessional communication skills online. The 10 students who undertook both module components completed a project evaluation form: there was 85.6% agreement that the module taught them about interprofessional education and 92.9% agreement that their knowledge of other health professionals' perspectives increased. An online module can support the development of communication skills, but is recommended as one component of an overall interprofessional education curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

A number of authors have outlined the competencies required for successful interprofessional

collaboration (Barr, 2001). Of central importance are those addressing competencies related to communication. Arguably the ability to communicate clearly and effectively with others is foundational to any collaborative interaction. Courses devoted

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to the development of communication skills in pre-licensure learners have evolved in recognition of the foundational necessity of these skills (Priest, Sawyer, Roberts & Rhodes, 2005).

Communication skills are thought to be best taught experientially; in consequence most of the courses described in the literature are face to face (Priest et al., 2005). While online and virtual learning activities have been used to promote inter-physician communication (Sijstermans, Jaspers, Bloemendaal & Schoonderwaldt, 2007; Johnsen et al., 2005; Stevens et al., 2006) and the characteristics of virtual teams have been explored (Suchan & Hayjak, 2001), the ability of students to learn communication skills with, from and about each other in an online environment is largely uninvestigated. A recent review and meta-analysis of evidence-based practices online provided only tentative conclusions regarding online learning approaches with potential for further application (Center for Technology in Learning, 2009). This extensive document focused on studies in which the effects were based on objective learning measures and met minimum criteria of quality. One clear recommendation was the value of encouraging students to reflect on their own levels of understanding of the material and concepts under discussion. Although the inclusion of quizzes did not reap the positive rewards expected, the inclusion of simulations appeared to be value-added.

This chapter will present the development, implementation and evaluation of an asynchronous online course on interprofessional communication skills consisting of two related modules: Communication I: Establishing and Understanding Relationships, and Communication II: Making the Most of Groups and Teams. The modules were developed through the Institute of Interprofessional Health Sciences Education, a virtual learning center, which is a joint initiative of McMaster University, University of Western Ontario, Laurentian University, and University of Ottawa in the province of Ontario, Canada.

BACKGROUND: CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The importance of establishing interprofessional teams to develop curricula focused on collaborative skills has been noted (Priest et al., 2005). Our team included faculty from medicine, nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and social work who had interest and experience in teaching communication skills within their specific professional program. From the outset the team determined an important collective belief; to work effectively in a team, learners need to understand their own personal beliefs and values. Prior to development of the curriculum, the team felt it important to reaffirm beliefs and core values related to communication and relationships. Several meetings were devoted to developing an Interprofessional Practice Model; this served to promote discussion among the team about the process and content of the curriculum, foster mutual understanding about others experiences and beliefs, and ultimately serve as a guiding model for our curriculum (see model in Figure 1).

The team also determined pedagogical principles that would inform curriculum development. Problem-based learning using a problem-stimulus to facilitate student learning and discussion would be the central focus. This approach was thoughtfully chosen. One of the key values of PBL is the opportunity it offers to work in small groups: wrestling with common scenarios, determining common and individual learning goals, searching for information to address these goals, then synthesizing and integrating the learning within the group (Gijbeis, Gochy, Van den Bossche & Segers, 2005; Taradi, Taradi, Radic & Pokrajac, 2005). Based on the team's extensive experience, problem based small groups are perfect crucibles for practicing how to work with diverse personalities and achieve predetermined objectives within a safe environment, applying values of mutual respect, honest communication, and thus develop-

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