Bridging the Gap: The Impact of Peer Coaching on Senior Veterinary Students' Clinical Communication Skills

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Background
Midwestern University's Clinical Communication Curriculum aims to systematically hone communication skills through rigorous skill definition, delineation, and regular practice in discussion sessions and simulated client encounters (SIM Labs). However, the curriculum's conclusion in the third year limited opportunities for senior students to revisit and polish these essential clinical communication skills. To address this gap, a proposal was made to integrate fourth-year students as peer coaches in pre-clinical students' communication skills SIM Labs. The principal objectives of this peer coaching initiative included enhancing the practice of essential clinical communication skills in MWU clinics, cultivating opportunities for feedback exchange, developing facilitation skills, and nurturing a non-judgmental and supportive learning environment. Both student and faculty coaches adopted a structured coaching process, employing methods such as permission-seeking, implementing a strengths-based approach, providing 'feedforward' suggestions, and endorsing a student-centered learning experience. The study aimed to evaluate whether the assimilation of clinical year students as coaches in the preclinical communication SIM Lab augmented the clinical students' communication skills as gauged by their self-assessment.

Methods
This mixed-methods study, spanning from March 2022 to April 2023, administered online surveys to clinical students both pre- and post-simulated client encounters where they served as coaches. The survey consisted of three self-assessment questions, rated on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high), concerning their competence in modeling essential clinical communication skills, giving feedback, and receiving feedback. Post-encounter assessments included two Likert-scale quantitative questions, asking students to rate their agreement with statements regarding the enhancement of their feedback skills due to the experience. The survey also invited students to provide free-text responses to reflect on the most valuable aspects of their experience and to offer suggestions for improvement. Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank tests were utilized to analyze the differences between pre and post-encounter scores.

Results
Out of 179 pre-encounter surveys, 95 had corresponding post-encounter surveys, and two additional post surveys came from two students who had an extra encounter, yielding 97 responses in total. The students rated their overall competency in modeling essential clinical communication skills as a median of 7 (IQR 6-8) before the encounter and 8 (IQR 8-9) after. They rated their competency at giving feedback at 7 (IQR 5-8) before and 9 (8-9) after. They rated their competency at receiving feedback as 8 (IQR 7-9) and 9 (IQR 8-10) after. The post-rating for all questions significantly increased, with all P <0.001. Students agreed that the experience enhanced their ability to give feedback, with a median response of 5 (IQR 4-5). Students also agreed that the experience enhanced their ability to receive feedback, with a median response of 4 (IQR 4-5). The top three themes regarding what they valued about the experience included enjoyment of mentorship and teaching, skills refreshment and improvement, and the ability to gain perspective and reflect upon their previous experience with the labs as a preclinical student. Suggestions for improvement included minor adjustments to feedback delivery, logistics, and training approaches.

Conclusion

Overall, the feedback suggests a highly positive experience for clinical students engaged as coaches in the communication simulation labs.