

The Power of Mentorship: The Effect of Peer versus Faculty Coaching in Veterinary Communication Simulation Labs

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Background

In an effort to fully integrate the Clinical Communication Curriculum throughout all four years of the veterinary program at Midwestern University, 4th year students on their Primary Care rotation served as peer coaches for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year student's communication skills communications labs with simulated clients (SIM Labs). The aim of this study was to objectively codify the effectiveness of peer coaches in facilitating the SIM Lab learning experience as well as to determine whether there were differences in the preclinical students' SIM experience based on coaching type (i.e., peer coach vs. faculty coach).

Methods

This mixed-methods study was conducted between January and May 2022. Preclinical students participated in simulated client encounters (SIM Labs) and completed an anonymous online survey afterward. The survey included five Likert-scale quantitative questions, rated on a scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). These questions included 1: "My coach(es) created a safe and supportive learning environment," 2: "My coach(es) modeled communication skills (e.g., open-ended questions, reflective listening, expressing empathy, identifying my agenda, etc.)," 3: "My coach(es) facilitated my learning process more than assumed the role of the 'teacher' (i.e., they did more 'asking' than 'telling')," 4: "I would be amenable to working with this coach/these coaches again in another SIM Lab," and 5: "This experience advanced my learning of essential clinical communication skills." They were also given the opportunity to provide two free-text responses, including "What I valued most about this experience was..." and "What I would recommend changing about the experience is..." Students also reported their coach type, which included faculty, peer, or both. Kruskal-Wallis equality-of-population tests were used to determine whether there were differences in the quantitative estimates between coach types.

Results

There were 96 responses, with 23 students having a faculty coach, 43 a peer coach, and 30 both. For all coach types, the median score for all 5 questions was 5, with the interquartile range (IQR) reported as 5-5, 4-5, 4-5, 5-5, and 4-5 for Q1-Q5, respectively. The only deviation for IQR was an IQR of 5-5 for the coach type of both for Q2. There was no difference between coach types for any question, with P = 0.51, 0.35, 0.68, 0.64, 0.55 for Q1-Q5, respectively. For the free-text feedback, 68 respondents provided feedback on what they valued. Common thematic responses included the peer coaches being more relatable than faculty, appreciation for multiple sources of feedback, and sharing clinical insights from a peer. One student shared "I feel of all the SIM encounters I've done, this was the most beneficial. The 3rd year peer coach helped provide me with the best tips I've received yet." For the free-text response on what they would change, common themes included more time for debriefing, more parity between the SIMs (some were considered easier than others), and "nothing."

Conclusion

The study findings indicate that both peer coaches and faculty coaches effectively facilitated the SIM Lab experience for preclinical students, with no significant differences between the two coaching types. Preclinical students positively perceived the inclusion of senior students as coaches. Constructive feedback primarily focused on the duration of the debriefing, with students expressing a desire for more time in this phase of the learning process.