WHAT THE TEACHERS WANT – The Potential for Peer Coaching

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Categories: Educational Strategies, Teachers/Trainers (including Faculty Development), Teaching and Learning

Received: 27/02/2019
Published: 13/03/2019

Abstract

Introduction: Faculty development offerings are appreciated by physicians who teach as part of their lifelong learning strategy. However, traditional formats of faculty development present challenges for participation. These teachers also appreciate feedback on their educational activities but are frequently limited by receiving only feedback from learners, which while valuable, have their limitations.

Program: A peer coaching program was developed in order to provide teachers with another source of feedback. Limitations and important considerations of such a program are described.

Conclusion: Although limitations exist, this peer coaching program has potential as a faculty development program that addresses needs and barriers of physician teachers.

Keywords: faculty development; peer coaching; program description; feedback on teaching

Introduction

Engaging in teaching is arguably one of the best ways for physicians to contribute to their lifelong learning strategy. In medicine, teaching can occur in different domains (e.g., clinical environments, classroom settings) and with various audiences (e.g., medical learners, patients, other health professionals). [Walsh et al. 2015] Even though there are differences in teaching in clinical and nonclinical settings, some principles are common to both (e.g., setting objectives, determining learner understanding, and considering learner questions).

Physicians generally find faculty development offerings to improve their teaching to be valuable, but traditional formats such as in-person workshops can be challenging logistically (e.g., travel and participation outside of work hours can be unworkable).

Teachers also want more feedback on their teaching for professional development. Mostly, teachers receive
feedback from their learners, which is valuable but limiting as learners represent only one feedback source. Furthermore, feedback from learners is generally not provided in a timely manner, and teachers may experience uncertainty if learner feedback is unclear or non-constructive. Also, there is no opportunity for teachers to clarify misunderstandings if feedback is provided anonymously.

Program

To address these barriers, we sought to provide faculty development that is valued by physicians, while making it accessible to them. By considering a format change from workshops, we were able to eliminate travel and personal time investment for teachers and offer them an additional source of teaching feedback. Therefore, we developed a peer coaching program to allow physicians to engage in faculty development while avoiding perceived barriers.

Peer coaching is a program in which a teacher (coach) attends a teaching session conducted by a fellow teacher (peer) to observe their teaching and provide collegial feedback to them. Peer coaching can take place in a clinical or nonclinical setting. We developed and initiated a peer coaching program specifically in a nonclinical setting.

We offered peer coaching to physicians who were to teach sessions or deliver presentations at a well-known regional conference. This was done via an email invitation introducing ourselves as their potential faculty coaches. As these physicians were already preparing for their conference presentations and sessions, there was no additional work or travel for them to participate in the peer coaching program; we also emphasized the development of teaching skills using feedback from the peer coach.

A report for each peer coaching episode was written by the coach and provided only to the teacher for their own use, including self-reflection, discussion with the peer coach, a trusted colleague or mentor. It was also suggested to teachers that they could claim this peer coaching activity for educational credits and enter it in their annual academic reports. The report template is shown in the Appendix.

Success of such a program in nonclinical settings is dependent on ensuring an adequate number of trained peer coaches and teachers’ willingness to participate in peer coaching. The program must ensure that teacher-identified barriers to participating in peer coaching are addressed and emphasize peer coaching as a collegial activity. Such a program is challenging to evaluate as peer coaches receive limited feedback, mostly because of the subtle nature of the peer coaching activity itself. Teachers are mostly thankful to the peer coach upon receipt of their peer coaching report.

Important Considerations

- The feedback should be provided in the form of a report by the peer coach only to the teacher; the teacher can then decide how to use the feedback for their lifelong learning purposes.

- The report (ideally one page) is meant to provide enough feedback only on the highlights of the teaching, so as not to be overwhelming to the teacher being coached.

- The report should be provided to teachers in a timely manner (e.g., within three days).

- Peer coaches should have enough time after the peer coaching activity to write a feedback report for the teacher.

- The teacher should be offered options on how the report and feedback could be used for personal
growth and professional development.

- Teachers should be able to request peer coaching whenever a teaching opportunity arises. Faculty developers should also be proactive and watch for opportunities to offer peer coaching.

**Conclusion**

This peer coaching program addresses perceived barriers to faculty development and provides teachers with a feedback source other than from learners. Although limitations exist, such a program provides a promising faculty development opportunity, with a potential to contribute to a teacher's overall lifelong learning strategy.

**Take Home Messages**

Peer coaching activities such as the one described in this article has potential as a faculty development activity.

**Notes On Contributors**

Dr. Koppula is Director of Faculty Development at the Department of Family Medicine, University of Alberta.

Dr. Babenko is a PhD medical education researcher at the Department of Family Medicine, University of Alberta.

**Acknowledgements**

None.

**Bibliography/References**


**Appendices**

**PEER COACHING REPORT** (template)

Date of teaching session:

Teacher/Presenter:

Topic of Presentation:

Audience:
Dear <teacher’s name>,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a peer coaching report for the above session. I have the following reflections on your teaching/presentation which I hope will be helpful for continued development of this session, and for your faculty development in general.

What Was Done Well:

For Consideration:

As a fellow teacher, I learned some valuable things from you during this session, including:

If you have any questions about this report or would like to discuss further, please contact me and we can make arrangements. Thank you again for this educational opportunity.

Best wishes,

<peer coach name and contact details>

Declarations

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Ethics Statement

As this is a program description and no inquiry was made as part of this manuscript, no ethics approval was sought.

External Funding

This paper has not had any External Funding

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