“To teach is to learn twice” Added value of peer learning among medical students during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Categories: Educational Strategies, Students/Trainees, Teaching and Learning, Technology, Undergraduate/Graduate

Received: 17/05/2020
Published: 22/06/2020

Abstract

In medical education, peer learning has a significant impact on deeper learning and considered an effective method of collaborative and deeper learning. This article highlights the adjustment of the final year medical students to the peer learning style during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the additional benefits of peer learning style and recommend key points that can help medical students to combat the current stressful situation. Adaptation to peer learning strategy may help to overcome this stressful situation and motivate each other to focus on studies. This approach can assist medical students to stay in touch with each other, collaborate, communicate, and boost each other morally. The peer learning style provides an opportunity for students to share thoughts and emotional reactions freely and friendly. This way can help to reduce stress and develop resilience. Students get rapid adaptation to technology-enhanced learning smoothly and effectively by helping each other to learn new skills. The feeling of staying connected with peers during the online sessions significantly augmented the ability to combat the crisis and augment social interactions.

Keywords: Peer learning style; Adaption to the COVID-19 Pandemic; Learning strategies during COVID-19; Collaborative learning; Medical student's learning styles

Introduction

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected almost all ages, races, and categories of professionals worldwide. Because of the current situation, there is an instinct adaptation to a rapidly changing environment physically, psychologically, and emotionally. This adaptation has affected personal, institutional, and national levels.
Currently, a significant transition is observed in terms of learning and teaching strategies at medical institutions. These amendments have a significant impact on medical students learning strategies.

Currently, medical students especially final year students are facing more challenges than another level of students because they have to graduate and secure their careers in such a foggy situation. In this article, medical students have reflected on the learning experience of adaptation peer learning strategies during March and April 2020. The group leaders of final year MBBS class and representatives of peer groups mentioned the best practice points for optimal learning during this crisis. Authors highlight the adjustment to peer learning style, explore the additional benefits of peer learning style during COVID-19 chaos, and recommend key points that can help medical students to combat the current stressful situation.

In medical education, peer learning has a significant impact on deeper learning and considered an effective method of promoting higher-order thinking and metacognition (Coffman, McConkey, and Colee, 2020). Most of the final year medical students adopted the peer learning style to adjust a new learning paradigm and distance learning through learning management systems. Although few students used to work in pairs and small groups before the pandemic, the significance of this learning style was unrecognized for the majority of students. The academic affairs department decided to switch for online learning through Moodle which rapidly changed the learning environment which was leverage on medical students to adapt to adopt peer learning styles.

Peer learning beyond collaborative learning

Peer learning improves the learning process through active discussion, sharing ideas, and encourages students toward higher-level thinking through challenging questions and tasks (ElHawary et al., 2019). Students develop their skills to work in groups and collaborate to fulfill the task. This enhances teamwork skills and task management skills (Hunt, Jones, and Carney, 2020). Students develop the opportunity to optimize their communication skills and improve the achievement of learning outcomes. Moreover, students learn self-management, time management skills to boost their energy towards the task (Zheng and Zhang, 2020).

Since medical campuses were closed and final medical students decided to make pairs and small groups according to their own choices. Our facilitators encouraged us to study in pairs, small groups, and assigned tasks as teams. The aim was to encourage students to help each other academically, socially, and mentally (Varalakshmi and Arunachalam, 2020; Rastegar Kazerooni et al., 2020). We divided our class among groups including three to six students in each group. Regular online meetings, sharing ideas on different subjects and topics significantly improved our sense of responsibility for our learning. During exams in April, our better performance in online written assessments and results depicted the quality of our learning through this approach. Moreover, we noticed an improvement in our problem-solving potential through critical thinking by recalling our group discussion. Additionally, peer learning provided us the opportunity to learn the skills of conflict resolution during teamwork.

Significance of peer learning during COVID-19 Pandemic

A famous writer Joseph Joubert was true in his vision when he uttered the golden words, “To teach is to learn twice”. In peer learning groups, it was an opportunity to enhance our communication skills through group discussions on decided topics (Gelis et al., 2020). Communication skill is of utmost importance in the workplace because one has to set the tone for how people perceive you and your ideas during teamwork. Additionally, our motto was "you teach me, I teach you". Therefore, we had a suave transition from on-campus to online learning. The moral support with pair and shared approach encouraged the smooth adaptability to a new learning paradigm. Figure 1 summarizes the impact of peer learning benefits during the COVID-19 crisis. It high lights the impact of change agents on the
development of key traits and skills among medical students through peer learning strategies.

**Figure 1.** Impact of change agent on the development of key traits and skills among medical student peer learning among medical students during COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Impact on motivation**

One of the major advantages of peer learning during COVID-19 was keeping the morale high by motivating each other. As the ongoing situation was very tough in terms of changing the schedule, weekly timetable amendments, change in the mode of assessment (online exams). Our peer groups motivated and morally supported each other. It was convenient to understand each other's emotions and levels of anxiety as all of us were sailing the same boat. Our aim was shared so we focused on objectives and worked on the philosophy "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

Additionally, this was a great opportunity for group leaders to polish leadership qualities (Szteinberg *et al.*, 2020). This way of learning helped us to enhance our emotional intelligence, discipline, and integrity among group members. Moreover, we developed more confidence to speak during informal discussions that empowered our self-esteem. The peer learning experience was a great opportunity for cooperative learning.

**Stress management**

Experiencing anxiety during a pandemic is rational but sometimes it is overblown depending upon one’s personality traits. The pandemic caused significant anxiety among medical students in the initial phase (Jin, Wang, and Lan, 2019). Among vulnerable students, there was continuous stress, and anxiety led to a pounding heart, sleep disturbance, change in eating habits, impaired performance, and depression. However, through peer learning style
students got an opportunity to share thoughts and emotional reactions freely and friendly. This shared approach assisted us to measure the level of anxiety and aided to find more emotionally vulnerable and fragile personalities.

We supported each other emotionally and avoided engaging in the infodemic of COVID-19. We advised each other to have minimum information about morbidities and mortalities around the world. The purpose was to stay informed about the situation but not to stimulate fight and flight response or limbic systems stimulation which causes extreme anxiety. We advised each other to focus on our studies and stay safe rather than spend our energy on a rapidly changing environment. Few of us experienced mindful body practice to train the mind for maximum focus and stress management strategy (Crowther, Robertson and Anderson, 2020).

We motivated each other energize our body by keeping healthy habits, for instance, eating a healthy diet, which is important for the plasticity in the brain. We encouraged each other to take small breaks and eat small snake during the planned study session. Besides we stimulated each other for online virtual exercise practices to boost immunity. Moreover, we encouraged normal sleep hours and reduce screen time on phones to avoid fatigue due to blue rays and sickness of computer screens. Coping with stress through peer learning style developed resilience among students and helped to come out of the paralyzed state of anxiety (Walsh et al., 2020).

**Online learning skills (Technology-enhanced learning)**
This pandemic is teaching all of us in different dimensions and how to cope with our circumstances. As all teaching activities were switched to technology-enhanced learning, we found ourselves in the beginning zone of a hundred percent online. We needed technical support to get used to the learning management system. Therefore, we required adjustment to get used to staying engaged in the teaching process itself. Peer learning helped us to adapt to technology-enhanced learning more smoothly and effectively. If we faced any issue in soft skills, we seek help from each other promptly. Most of us recognized the improvement in the online teaching skills through peer learning style was remarkable.

**Improving students' social interactive learning**
Although there were instructions by health care professionals to keep social distance during the COVID-19 crisis, peer learning helped us to engage more deeply with each other. Through this way of informal discussion, we had closer social interaction virtually. Although we had been together for five years in the same class, we had never got to know about our peers before. We get an opportunity to encounter various behaviors and learning attitudes. Consequently, it was a natural opportunity to develop a good relationship with our peers. This approach helped students who live in a different region and away from the home city. Saying connected with our peers during the online sessions significantly augmented the ability to combat the crisis.

**Challenges**
The effectiveness of peer learning needs to be investigated through qualitative and quantitative studies in the future. It will help us to establish the authenticity of the peer learning strategy during the adaption process to a new learning paradigm. Additionally, it is important to enquire about the views of those students who could not adjust in this way of learning generally. It is imperative to identify the additional factors which hinder adaptation to peer learning. Moreover, an in-depth analysis is required to determine the barriers and shortcomings of peer learning.

**Conclusion**
During the COVID-19 pandemic, medical students are facing great challenges in terms of graduation, securing an internship placement, and enter in professional life smoothly. A major disruption in the learning environment, social
distancing, fear of disease, and uncertainty about the future have a great impact on learning. Adaptation to peer learning strategy may help to overcome this stressful situation and motivate each other to focus on studies. This approach can assist medical students to stay in touch with each other, collaborate, communicate, and boost each other morally.

**Take Home Messages**

- Peer learning improves the learning process through active discussion, sharing ideas, and encourages students toward higher-level thinking.
- During the COVID-19 crisis, peer learning is a very effective learning approach by motivating each other.
- The peer learning style provides an opportunity for students to share thoughts and emotional reactions freely and friendly. This way can help to reduce stress and develop resilience.
- Students get fast adaptation to technology-enhanced learning more smoothly and effectively by helping each other to learn new skills.
- The feeling of staying connected with peers during the online sessions significantly augmented the ability to combat the crisis and augment social interactions.

**Notes On Contributors**

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**Acknowledgements**

The authors of this article are thankful to final year medical students who agreed to provide their opinions anonymously and voluntarily. Authors appreciated their contribution to share their experiences, opinions and views regarding peer learning strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1: Author is Dr Shazia Iqbal; the creator/owner of copyright.
Bibliography/References


Appendices

None.

Declarations

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

This is a Personal Opinion piece and did not require Ethics Approval.

External Funding

This article has not had any External Funding

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