Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), a novel approach for the teaching of pre-clinical and clinical skills?

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Background

Peer assisted learning (PAL), while a common feature in medical, nursing and veterinary education, is less well utilised within dental education. PAL can be defined as ‘an educational experience in which one student teaches one or more fellow students’ (1). PAL can be used in both pre-clinical and clinical settings. A PAL project was designed for use in Glasgow Dental School, recruiting senior (Year 5) students to teach junior students (Year 1). Previous work that used a randomised controlled trial design looked at the peer taught students’ performance in OSCE examinations, versus staff taught groups (2). The longitudinal effect of peer learning is also under review.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the student experience of PAL, with the research question focusing on the educational and social benefits for both junior and senior students.

Method

The two topic areas chosen for this study were:

1. Introduction to Handpiece Skills (pre-clinical)
2. Introduction to Impression taking (clinical)

• Qualitative methodology was utilised to evaluate the student experience.
• Four focus groups of participating senior and junior students were carried out by independent experienced researchers. Groups consisted of either junior or senior students.
• The groups were audiotaped and transcribed.
• Data were coded, categorised and arranged into themes.
• Analysis of the data used a phenomenological approach.

Results

Two overarching themes were identified: transforming roles and quality learning experience. Transitioning was important for both groups.

1. Transforming Roles

Identify development as a dental student was important for the junior students.

‘Getting your hands on a handpiece for the first time, really... actually getting a go... I really enjoyed that.’

The junior students used the senior student as role models and also sought information about social elements of the course.

The senior students developed teaching skills, including skills in giving feedback, in training sessions prior to their interactions with the junior students.

‘It was nice to know that we could teach something like that...’

‘I didn’t realise how difficult it was to teach actually, until I did it...’

2. Quality Learning Experience

While the expert nature of the staff was acknowledged by the junior students, the student tutors were more abundant, had more time, and had a more relaxed approach to their teaching.

‘... they were in your position just a few years ago. They were really friendly and approachable and I felt comfortable asking questions.’

Senior students used the opportunity to refresh their skills.

‘I think it actually really improved my learning of how to take impressions by teaching someone else...’

They acknowledged that teaching helped develop their graduate attributes such as confidence and communication skills, and that they had really enjoyed the experience.

‘It was nice to do something different, and I liked the responsibility, its great to be responsible for something...’

Conclusions

Both year groups gained positively from the experience. While peer assisted learning is currently under-utilised in a dental context, it can be beneficial in the teaching of simple clinical skills, with utility in facilitating student interaction.

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