Reviewer's report

Title: Delivery and use of individualised feedback in large class medical teaching

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Review of BMC Medical Education manuscript
Delivery and use of individualised feedback in large class medical teaching

This is an interesting paper describing a methodology of giving feedback to students on their performance on summative assessments. In itself the paper provides very valuable information and example for other medical schools to consider how to give students more feedback. NSS results show that students are dissatisfied with the quantity of feedback that they receive. The methodology described here where students are given important feedback around their performance against stated learning objectives has the advantages of giving detailed feedback on performance against objective criteria. It also has the added advantage of contributing to programmatic/longitudinal assessment and feedback; this is by giving the students evaluative summative feedback across different domains of learning. This does lend itself to ensuring a method by which students can then reflect and utilise this feedback to consider how they have performed in a more holistic manner, rather than learning to “pass the test”.

Having said how valuable this information is, the paper does need some quite considerable re writing in order to make it fit for publication.

Firstly the abstract overall totally needs re writing as it is unclear - the methodology is confused and it is not clear at all how the surveys were administered. The conclusions are rather like a sweeping statement in the abstract and jump straight from learning outcomes to surmising that feedback is effective.

The strength of the whole paper is around giving students more quantitative feedback. The major weakness relies in the authors attempt to over-extrapolate from giving feedback to the students utilising the feedback – and there is no evidence for this (either within this paper and is limited in the literature!).

Within the first paragraph of their background the authors again make another sweeping statement that ‘this will lead to conscious competence’. There is a wealth of increasing evidence around that feedback is not ‘reaction’ and giving feedback does not in any way from all these increasing amount of research evidence significantly impact upon students abilities to make use of the feedback and alter performance. This is of course our hope but the proportion of students that are able to do this purely by giving them such quantitative feedback is limited.
Teacher facilitated models as the authors identify places high demand upon resources; this is the strength of the paper as it provides a useful model for giving students feedback in another form rather than just returning the question items to them. However, feedback models particularly as described by the authors ‘used according to the teachers preferences and abilities’ have little impact upon students abilities to utilise feedback - that is a completely separate literature and I would suggest is avoided within this paper. There is increasing amount of work been done on self regulated learning and students’ abilities to calibrate and judge the quality of their learning and how this impacts upon their performance.

Presenting the information as learning objectives has potential but is not fact that it will enhance their ability to utilise feedback. It is well recognised that students have difficulty with feed forward and the recognition of skills rather than learning outcomes for future learning.

The methodology needs completely re writing. It is completely unclear how many surveys were done, how the surveys that appear to have been done across different years of the course were analysed, whether one or two cohorts contributed. There are three different descriptions of surveys, one that is reported to be behaviour based survey another reported to attitude based survey and yet another that is referred to as been an interview administered survey. The response rates for all of these are extremely variable and deductions particularly from those that have a less that 10% response rate cannot be extrapolated from to make deductions.

Whilst some of the information around students describing their reasons for not visiting or not achieving objectives are perhaps interesting and could be utilised in a descriptive way, rather than trying to give a percentage when there is such a low return rate is invalid. Additionally I would suggest that all the extrapolation and correlation with what I infer to be previously described learning styles questionnaires (which is reported to rely on students reporting their learning style rather than the authors having correlated – another aspect of the methodology and results that is totally unclear) is really invalidated by the low return rate and is over extrapolating from this data. The validity and usefulness of learning styles has been debated quite hotly in the literature in the last few years and referencing it within this paper actually detracts from the valuable parts of the paper.

The discussion opens well. However within the discussion as I have mentioned earlier really would remove the percentages in relation to the surveys (having clarified what surveys were done and if clarifying whether pooled data is been used across years or not). As mentioned previously I would also remove the references to learning styles and stick to in the discussion the value of providing programmatic assessments and feedback on assessment outcomes that correlate across learning domains as described in this model. The conclusion also needs rewording from again the assumption that this will ‘alter’ the effectiveness of their learning. The statement that it does encourage reflection may well be true but perhaps the usefulness of the linked resources could be brought out more perhaps including or suggesting development of other resources that would encourage such reflective learning and practice.