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Implement a Learners as Partners Educational Strategy in Medical Education

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Introduction

Learners as Partners is an educational strategy that is characterised by 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally' (Matthews et al. 2018). Key aspects of learners as partners include active engagement of students in their education and a community of partnership. All parties share responsibility for identifying the problems or opportunities for improvement, devising a solution and co-delivery of that solution. This approach to education has gained momentum in recent years for a variety of reasons. These include awareness of increased meta-cognitive learning, raising graduate attributes and employability skills, engaging and empowering underrepresented students, and increasing student ownership for learning. However, implementing this strategy has many challenges for students, teachers and institutions. The purpose of this *How to* is to provide a guide for educators on how to implement 'Learners as Partners' into education, identifying challenges and barriers and the way in which these could be overcome to benefit learners.

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

The curriculum in medical education and in many other health related subjects is largely influenced by regulatory and professional requirements. A curriculum that is prescribed may leave little room for flexibility, resulting in lack of choice for students and disempowerment. A lack of choice negates personal and professional responsibility in learning, which can further impact the impression of 'partnership' or lack thereof. However, whilst professional bodies may set some regulatory constraints, it is important to recognise that curriculum designers have the autonomy to choose how the curriculum is delivered. To this end, Learners as Partners principles can be embedded within curriculum delivery. A student-centred approach can be undertaken through open communications that can help mitigate this to an extent and ensure transparency. This can be achieved by developing an educational environment where positive attitudes and values of this educational approach are embraced.

Attitudes and Values

Learners and educators bring with them into the learning context their own set of attitudes, values and expectations about learning. In some instances, these may be inconsistent with the implementation of this educational strategy. Negative attitudes should be challenged to ensure that all involved 'buy' into this approach to education. To this end, a joint professional development strategy should be sought to maximise empowerment of both parties. It is essential to seek out the views of students, educators and other key stakeholders from the outset of the implementation process to identify conflicting priorities and perspectives. A variety of methods can be used for this including staff/student panels, focus groups and surveys but care should be taken to consider the views of all aspects of the student community, including part-time students, international students, and those with disabilities, to maximise inclusivity.

Protected Time

One of the most common environmental challenges to partnerships between learners and educators is lack of protected time. Clinical commitments are often prioritised to the detriment of time set aside for learning and development.

Protected time is often a component of educational or learning contracts and educators should ensure that protected time is prioritised and honoured. Wherever possible and if resources allow, consider increasing the quantity of protected time.

Resources

Limited financial resources are a common challenge in both healthcare and education. An initial investment is often necessary to establish a suitable learning environment. However, in the long term, the benefits – including attracting more trainees – should outweigh the costs and justify the initial investment, becoming cost-neutral.

On an institutional level, sufficient numbers of staff are required to ensure protected time is met and learning contracts are honoured. Otherwise, there is a risk that other commitments might infringe on this, for example clinical responsibilities. Ensuring a private physical space for meetings between learner and educator is important, although it can be difficult to implement. Appropriate organisation can improve this. Consideration of shared spaces is also important when establishing a culture of partnership.

Support and Relationships

Challenges associated with the relationship between individuals include the difficulty in defining 'partnership' and how it may be interpreted. Additionally, power dynamics can affect trust, engagement and inclusivity within partnership. This can then affect motivation and limit what each participant gains from the situation, resulting in a loss of reciprocity.

Co-development of the partnership values mitigates the power imbalance from affecting the relationship and helps to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes with appropriate transparency. The various parties involved should be encouraged to co-develop partnership values and negotiate mutually acceptable solutions to problems that arise. Any proposed solutions, or changes to the course or curriculum, should be fed back to those impacted to ensure transparency, with potential for further consultation. It is important to consider the incentive structures that exist, who they benefit, and whether they can be modified to ensure all parties benefit. For example, students who participate in relationships may gain additional skill sets and further insight into educational settings, as well as accomplishment from their altruistic behaviour.

A Worked Example of Learners as Partners

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) sets out a comprehensive spiral curriculum and assessment requirements that must be completed over the course of a year. The requirements of each partner are clearly outlined, potentially limiting learner empowerment and free choice. To overcome this and to embed a Learners as Partners approach, trainees and their supervisors work together to decide how they will cover the curriculum.

During training, trainees will divide their time between clinical work and furthering their own education. Some activities include:

- A learning contract agreed between the learner and trainer provides a safety net for partnership by outlining roles and responsibilities in learning. This contributes to the reciprocity of the relationship: the learner benefits from supervision and the trainer benefits from the additional member of staff.
- Periods of 'self-directed learning' undertaken on the half day release.
- Recording of 'clinical consultations' for discussion and feedback from trainer.
- Case-based discussions undertaken frequently during the working week. Trainees have the freedom to choose their cases and consultations covering the RCGP's curriculum.
- Trainee presence at a practice is demanding of the GP trainer's time for supervision. Financial investment may be required to purchase additional resources in order to be approved as a 'training practice', for example purchasing video recording equipment and providing a practice library. It is anticipated that the practice will benefit from this by having the assistance of the GP trainee, supported by additional resources from the deanery.

Conclusion

Embracing the Learners as Partners educational strategy has many benefits to both educators and learners, and it is important to recognise that challenges can be overcome as long as the underpinning values and attitudes are consistent with the approach. Principles can be embedded at various levels within curriculum delivery, through teaching methods, evaluation and engagement with learners. As an educator, there are various strategies that can be adopted to ensure that learners feel valued and perceive themselves as partners within educational settings. Even in non-modifiable environments, it is often feasible to adjust teaching strategies to empower students and develop partnerships. Above all, it is important to remain flexible and responsive to the changing needs of students and other stakeholders, as well as maximising self-accountability and regulation (Huber, 2003).

Take Home Messages

Do...
... co-develop partnership values - consider the use of a learning contract
... reduce barriers to participation - establish a safe space for openness
... consider the physical space - develop shared spaces
... develop joint professional development activities
... be authentic in your relationships with learners
... devise solutions together

Don't...
... undermine the learning contract
... leave feedback unanswered
... provide token responses to learners' contributions

References and further reading

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