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# Breaking the Mold: Encouraging Student-led Facilitation in Medical Education to Transform Learners into Leaders

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## ABSTRACT

The approach of students as facilitators is an innovative teaching-learning approach that highlights the active involvement of students in guiding and supporting the learning experiences of their peers. It not only enhances students' understanding and retention of knowledge but also fosters a sense of ownership, responsibility, and professional growth. As institutions plan to implement the strategy of employing students as facilitators, they must keep a few things in mind to ensure that the intended learning outcomes can be accomplished. In conclusion, the use of students as facilitators in the field of medical education acts as a transformative approach to learning. In fact, the employment of this approach can result in better student engagement, improved retention of knowledge, promotes collaborative learning, and also prepares them for their future roles as health-care professionals. This calls for the need for all institutions to explore the possibility and introduce students as facilitators of teaching-learning methods to supplement conventional teaching methods.

**Keywords:** Learning, medical education, student

## INTRODUCTION

In the conventional educational environment, teachers remain the sole information provider, while students are regarded as the mere recipient of knowledge.<sup>[1]</sup> Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that in the future, each undergraduate medical student of today's era is expected to become a facilitator or source of information provider to their batchmates or junior students (in their undergraduate period), or to undergraduate students or postgraduate juniors (in their period of residency), or even to the junior doctors (in their clinical practice).<sup>[1,2]</sup> Thus, it becomes quite essential that we must expose undergraduate medical students to facilitation skills to prepare them eventually to discharge their roles effectively in the due course. Moreover, it will also challenge the existing norms and we can acknowledge the valuable contributions of students in the learning process of their colleagues and even juniors.<sup>[1-3]</sup>

## STUDENTS AS FACILITATORS

The approach of students as facilitators attracted lots of attention in heterogeneous educational settings, and the same even applies to medical education.<sup>[2]</sup> In general, student as a facilitator is an innovative teaching-learning approach that highlights the active involvement of students in guiding and supporting the learning experiences of their peers.<sup>[2,3]</sup> It would

not be wrong to state that student facilitators act as a link between teachers and students and ensure that the learning remains inclusive. The employment of students as facilitators brings about a shift in the traditional classroom dynamics, thereby enabling a collaborative learning environment. Considering the fact that success in health-care delivery is determined by better communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills, exposing students to the role of facilitator will help immensely.<sup>[3-5]</sup>

It not only enhances students' understanding and retention of knowledge but also fosters a sense of ownership, responsibility, and professional growth.<sup>[4,5]</sup> Moreover, in this process, the student facilitator also gets an opportunity to share their knowledge and experience with their peers and accordingly engage in critical thinking and problem-solving activities.<sup>[5,6]</sup> Based on the experience acquired in such sessions, these student facilitators can also be utilized in other academic activities like workshops.<sup>[6,7]</sup> From the administrator's perspective, this is a wonderful opportunity to utilize the collective wisdom of their students to move forward toward the attainment of the vision and mission of the institution. In short, this approach of using a student as facilitators is useful and effective for student facilitators, other peers, teachers, and administrators.<sup>[5-8]</sup>

## JUSTIFICATION FOR STUDENTS AS FACILITATORS

Before we employ the strategy of the student as a facilitator, we must be convinced about its utility and this can be explained on the basis of the following justifications.<sup>[4-6]</sup> Upon employment of students as facilitators, it gives an opportunity for students to get connected with their peers, as they not only learn from each other but also even there is an enabling learning environment.<sup>[7,8]</sup> Further, it gives a platform for them to have better engagement and thus they contribute actively to the discussion, which in turn promotes deep learning. In continuation, it also helps the student to augment their communication skills as in the process of facilitation, they simplify complex topics, with the help of examples.<sup>[8-10]</sup> Moreover, these educational experiences ensure that there is better collaboration and teamwork among students, which is also essential for future successful health-care practices.<sup>[9,10]</sup>

Further, these student facilitators act as role model for their colleagues and they can learn the skill of effective learning, professionalism, and lifelong learning.<sup>[10,11]</sup> While students act as facilitators, they can encourage critical thinking among their peers by asking application-based questions, which will in turn motivate students to become curious and learn better. In this process, the student facilitator even acquires leadership skills, which happens to be one of the

core competencies expected of a competent medical graduate. As students assume the role of a facilitator, they feel the ownership of their learning and thus are motivated to learn themselves and even facilitate learning among their peers.<sup>[7,10]</sup> Finally, these student facilitators can provide customized support to their peers based on their specific needs, which might not be possible with real teachers.<sup>[9,12]</sup>

## PREREQUISITES FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT AS FACILITATOR

As institutions plan to implement the strategy of employing students as facilitators, they must keep a few things in mind to ensure that the intended learning outcomes can be accomplished.<sup>[3,4]</sup> This has to begin with the fact that students who are going to assume the role of facilitator must have a thorough knowledge of the topic which will significantly help them in their role of facilitation. In addition, students have to be trained in the domain of facilitation techniques (namely, active listening, effective questioning, managing group dynamics), communication skills, and time management (so that they can maintain a balance between their academics and this responsibility of facilitation).<sup>[5-8]</sup> Moreover, students must be exposed to those scenarios which will aid them to acquire leadership skills, and conflict resolution skills, as such situations might actually emerge while they are doing facilitation among peers.<sup>[11,13]</sup>

Further, it is also necessary that student facilitator need to nurture critical thinking skills, which will aid them to analyze complex themes, facilitate discussions, and thereby lay down the seeds for higher-order thinking among their peers.<sup>[7,8]</sup> The student facilitator must be also trained in the skill of giving effective and constructive feedback, which will in turn strengthen their role as facilitator and will also augment learning among peers.<sup>[2,3]</sup> Finally, these students should be given access to adequate resources to ensure continued learning and professional development. All these trainings and exposure to the student facilitator will significantly aid in enhancing their overall confidence and will empower them to effectively support peer learning.<sup>[3-6]</sup>

## ADVANTAGES OF EMPLOYMENT OF STUDENTS AS FACILITATOR

Students serving as facilitators in the learning process in medical education have been linked with multiple merits, such as engagement in active learning, which ensures in-depth understanding and better retention of the topic that is covered.<sup>[12,14]</sup> In contrast to the teachers, with the student facilitator, the other students can be more relaxed and feel free to engage in discussion without having the fear that they will be judged.<sup>[2]</sup> The entire process plays its part in augmenting the communication skills of both facilitator

and interpersonal skills. Further, as students know that they have to facilitate learning among their peers, they adopt a self-directed learning approach and take ownership of their individual learning and are thus empowered.<sup>[4,5]</sup>

As these student facilitators are one among the other peers, they can ensure better engagement and create a collaborative learning environment.<sup>[11,13]</sup> Furthermore, we can be hopeful that the entire exercise can augment the possibility of the development of critical thinking skills among peers. Moreover, student facilitator develops leadership skills, teamwork skills, and group management skills, and this entire educational experience also enhances their confidence.<sup>[10-12]</sup> As the student facilitator works along with their peers in an interactive manner, they realize the learning needs of their peers and thus can adopt an empathetic approach toward them. In short, the above-mentioned advantages ensure that we can ensure the availability of a student-centered learning environment.<sup>[13-16]</sup>

## STUDENTS AS FACILITATOR: POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME

Using students as facilitators in medical education has its own share of limitations, and we must ensure that these limitations are adequately addressed to optimize the learning process.<sup>[2]</sup> A student who does not have proper knowledge about the topic which she/he is about to facilitate will account for major lacunae in the delivery of education.<sup>[1,2,4]</sup> At the same time, if students are not good at their facilitation skills (or are not well prepared), the utility of the session becomes limited, and the ultimate objective is not attained.<sup>[6-8]</sup> As students do not have enough teaching experience, we cannot and we must not use this strategy as a sole teaching-learning method, but rather as a supplementary method. At times, it can turn out to be extremely challenging for the students to manage their time to carry out the task of facilitation as well as continue their learning simultaneously.<sup>[4,13,14]</sup>

Further, we cannot also undermine the possibility that these student facilitators might introduce bias and subjectivity in the discussion if they are not properly sensitized about their roles and learning objectives.<sup>[15,16]</sup> In addition, in comparison to teachers, they might lack authority in the class, and thus it is extremely important that all students should be sensitized about this kind of process so that everyone participates and contributes in a meaningful manner.<sup>[7-9]</sup> This will also aid in maintaining proper authority and managing peer dynamics between the different members, and thus, we can maintain a respectful and inclusive learning environment.<sup>[12,13]</sup> Furthermore, there can be issues with bias, inability to give feedback to their peers,

and poor preparation. However, all these challenges can be minimized by better sensitization and preparation of the students.<sup>[4,5]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The use of students as facilitators in the field of medical education acts as a transformative approach to learning. In fact, the employment of this approach can result in better student engagement, improved retention of knowledge, promotes collaborative learning, and also prepares them for their future roles as health-care professionals. This calls for the need for all institutions to explore the possibility and introduce students as facilitators of teaching-learning method to supplement conventional teaching methods.

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