PERSPECTIVE

Using the framework of entrustable professional activities to promote reflective practice among medical students

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ABSTRACT

Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs) have been employed across heterogeneous settings in training medical students and preparing them to provide quality-assured clinical care to patients. In the field of medical education and healthcare delivery, reflective practice refers to the process of critical analysis of own's experiences and actions in a systemic manner to not only learn from these but even take remedial measures to ameliorate performance in the future. The designed rubrics of milestones for individual EPAs specifically provide clear tasks and expectations from students, and based on their performances, they can reflect and even make efforts to align their progress. The decision to use EPAs to promote reflective practice in any institution has been linked with multiple challenges, nevertheless, there have been some concerns that need to be timely addressed to draw meaningful outcomes and benefit students. In conclusion, reflective writing has been associated with multiple benefits to students and makes them self-directed learners. The need of the hour is to use the framework of entrustable professional activities to promote the practice of reflective writing among medical students.

KEYWORDS

Entrustable professional activities, Competencies, Medical students, Reflection, Medical education, Lifelong learners

INTRODUCTION

Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs) have been employed across heterogeneous settings in training medical students and preparing them to provide quality-assured clinical care to patients (1,2). These activities generally deal with those tasks that are fundamental to specific types of healthcare professionals, and assessment of the same provides valuable insights regarding their readiness for unsupervised practice (2). Each EPA is a combination of two or more competencies, which are context-specific, relevant to the real world, and are observable and measurable in nature (3). Medical students are expected to move from needing strict supervision to requiring no supervision, and this progression indicates their readiness (4). Moreover, EPAs can be customized to various levels, which makes these tools extremely effective in delivering and assessing competency-based medical education across different medical colleges (1-3).

Reflective practice for healthcare professionals

In the field of medical education and healthcare delivery, reflective practice refers to the process of critical analysis of own's experiences and actions in a systemic manner to not only learn from these but even take remedial measures to ameliorate performance in the future (5,6). This is very much

required when medical students or healthcare professionals interact with patients, and make decisions regarding their management, as the act of reflective practice makes them self-aware and motivates them to question their thoughts and judgment, solely to improve patient care and continue professional growth (7,8). Healthcare professionals and medical students who are regularly engaged in reflective practice, tend to make evidence-driven clinical decisions, strong problem-solving abilities, and accordingly deliver better patient care (6,7). In addition, these professionals have better communication and interpersonal skills, and more emotional resilience owing to greater self-awareness, especially in high-stress settings (5-7).

Integrating EPAs into reflective practice

The designed rubrics of milestones for individual EPAs specifically provide clear tasks and expectations from students, and based on their performances, they can reflect and even make efforts to align their progress (9). In-fact, when students reflect on their performance, they realize their strengths and weaknesses in specific tasks, motivating them to concentrate more on areas where they are falling short (6,8). After students have performed the given EPAs, they receive constructive feedback from their teachers, and this reinforces reflection on the suggestions given, thereby aiding in development (10). Further, students can use EPAs to reflect on their present level of performance, and accordingly define realistic time-bound goals (11). In other words, students can formulate their individual learning paths to achieve the intended competencies (11).

Strategies for implementing EPAs to promote reflective practice

Medical colleges can initiate the practice of EPA-based assessments within the existing curriculum, wherein upon the completion of tasks, students are encouraged to engage in reflective practices (such as journaling, reflective writing using some framework, etc.), where the focus is on what they learned, what went well, and how they would like to become better in future (12,13). Teachers can be asked to assess these reflections and help students establish connections between their performance and the broader professional competencies (14). To make these reflective practices student-friendly, institutions can promote the use of digital platforms (like e-portfolios), where students can reflect on their performance, and also receive real-time feedback (15,16). In-fact, these technology-driven platforms allow both teachers and students to engage in reflective discussions and longitudinal tracking of the subject-specific EPA tasks (15-17).

Identified barriers and Potential solutions

The decision to use EPAs to promote reflective practice in any institution has been linked with multiple challenges, nevertheless, there have been some concerns that need to be timely addressed to draw meaningful outcomes and benefit students. Considering the packed curriculum, it is a major concern for educators to identify dedicated time to facilitate structured reflections among students (12,13). The best approach will be to schedule specific time slots for reflective practice within the daily activities so that it does not interfere with other assignments, and supplement the same with the use of digital platforms to capture reflections beyond classroom hours (12). At the same time, reflective practice may not be consistently merged into the curriculum along with EPA assessments, and this concern can be overcome by embedding reflective writing as one of the learning objectives, and ensuring that the reflection component is an integral part of EPA-based assessments (12,13). The next major concern is the lack of training in writing or assessing reflection for both students and teachers, resulting in superficial or ineffective reflection on performance in EPAs (11,17). This essentially requires organizing workshops and training programs targeting the importance of reflection, the frameworks that can be used to write reflections, and the essential considerations while recording reflections (18).

One of the prerequisites to draw meaningful reflections and learning is the delivery of constructive, specific, and timely feedback immediately following the performance in a specific EPA (10,19). If this feedback falls short, it is difficult to motivate students to write deep reflections, and there lies the need to train faculty members in the art of delivery of feedback following various principles, and various models by which feedback can be delivered to students (10,19). From the students' perspective, they might be reluctant to write deep reflections due to fear of exposing their weaknesses or receiving negative remarks (20). This calls for the need to create a non-judgmental and supportive environment for students where they feel comfortable reflecting on their mistakes without being afraid and eventually focus on professional and personal growth (mistakes are being recognized as learning opportunities) (20). In a busy clinical setup, teachers might be too busy to facilitate reflective discussions around EPA performance, because of which students don't get proper guidance. There lies the importance of establishing a culture of promoting reflection in the institution and sensitizing teachers about the need to encourage reflection among students and how it can play its part in making them lifelong learners (21).

Conclusion

In conclusion, reflective writing has been associated with multiple benefits to students and makes them self-directed learners. The need of the hour is to use the framework of entrustable professional activities to promote the practice of reflective writing among medical students.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors haven't used any generative AI/AI assisted technologies in the writing process.

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