Workplace-based assessment as an educational tool
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In the UK we are approaching completion of the second year of new postgraduate Specialty Training programmes, most of which include a variety of workplace-based assessments (WPBA). This therefore seems an opportune time to review the AMEE Guide: Workplace-based assessment as an educational tool. (Norcini & Burch 2007) The Guide sets out its stall; to demonstrate the value of WPBA in its ability to enhance learning. WPBA achieves this by aligning assessments and required competencies, providing feedback to learners, and helping to guide individuals towards desired performance. The difficulty of using WPBA to make summative judgements is acknowledged (one of the main challenges of WPBA in UK postgraduate training), and the Guide therefore concentrates on WPBA as a formative method.

So, what is the value of the Guide and how effective is it? I offer a personal view based on my experience in postgraduate training in the UK.

The Guide is helpfully set out in five sections: review of formative feedback, WPBA tools, feedback, training of faculty and challenges ahead. I will take each section in turn, highlighting how this Guide can be used to enhance our understanding and application of WPBA and, also consider areas that could be explored further.

The authors’ review of formative feedback is interesting in that while providing evidence of its effectiveness in classroom and undergraduate contexts, they also highlight evidence of sparse use in both undergraduate and postgraduate training programmes. The tension of using WPBA as a summative assessment and the expertise of educational supervisors are postulated reasons. However, in the UK, inclusion of WPBA in postgraduate training programmes will ensure that WPBA happens and the main issue to consider is how to maximise its effectiveness.

A variety of WPBA tools are described and proformas included. They have all been extensively researched and although mostly used in a formative manner, their respective reliabilities allow confidence in their use. I think this is particularly important in the UK where WPBA is used in a formative manner, but, individual assessments act cumulatively to guide the educational supervisor in making a summative judgement. In addition to the methods familiar in the UK, it is interesting to see the variety of tools that are available and how closely related they appear. This Guide is about formative assessment and explores feedback skills. The authors present a three-question, four-level model that enhances reflection on both the purpose and execution of providing feedback. This is a valuable model. It offers a reflective framework that for many of us will be of enormous value in dissecting situations where feedback has been less effective than we may have wished. I wonder however if it is not too complex for feedback encounters. Perhaps keeping to a few simple rules of descriptive, non-judgemental feedback, and concentrating on behaviours and actions that can be changed will be of most use to educational supervisors involved in day to day contact with learners. Another facet of providing or facilitating feedback
is third party feedback such as multi-source feedback. This type of feedback is different in that it is not about specific learning encounters but more general in nature. It can be perceived by learners as directed at the personal level, which, as the Guide points out, is frequently unhelpful. This is acknowledged but not explored in detail. Research suggests a counselling model may be best; however the skills required for this task are not made explicit.

Faculty participation and training is key to the success of WPBA, with the first requirement being to promote interest and motivate educational supervisors. The importance of the mentoring relationship that is often present in quality medical training was explored by the BEME systematic review of assessment feedback and clinical performance. This review suggested that developing a longitudinal relationship with an authoritative and credible source was an important step in improving a learner’s performance (Veloski et al. 2006). Perhaps highlighting this evidence in the Guide might have helped promote that interest and motivation.

The final section on challenges ahead summarises the issues of faculty participation and the need for improvements in the quality of WPBA and formative feedback. This is indeed the case, but I would also suggest that reading this guide is a good start to tackling these very issues and I recommend this guide for all who are involved in WPBA.

Notes on Contributor

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References


This AMEE Guide Supplement was published in Medical Teacher 2010. 32:524–525.