

‘Mystery Shopper’ lecture-feedback programme – a collaborative project between staff and students at a graduate-entry medical school

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Case report

Organisational/historical context

The MB ChB programme at the University of Warwick is a graduate-entry-only medical degree course located in the UK, accepting students with a first degree in any subject. Many students have higher degrees or have worked in other health-related professions; all have experienced higher education in other settings. Their feedback identified that some lectures were of a poor standard.

Feedback has historically been collected only at the end of each five- or ten-week block; in consequence, the time-lapse between delivery of lectures and the seeking of feedback produced a lack of detail at the individual-lecture level. Thus, whilst the Faculty was aware that there were problems with some lectures, it was not always able to identify which and, even when it could do so, the detail provided was insufficient for appropriate supportive measures to be deployed to improve staff performance.

Lecturers were also requesting more detailed personal feedback about individual lectures for their own professional development and for evidence to support their GMC re-validation.

Previously, peer feedback or observation by a teaching-and-learning specialist had been offered, but take-up was both very low and further limited by staff availability and organisational constraints.

Specifications of the project

The problem was two-fold: lecturers were not getting the feedback they required to improve and students were becoming increasingly frustrated about inconsistency in the quality of lectures. It was in this context that the ‘mystery shopper’ lecture-feedback programme emerged; it is based on the concept of the ‘mystery shopper’ scheme widely used in the retail and service sectors to provide feedback on the quality of service provided to customers. A project team – four students from different cohorts of the MB ChB programme and the programme’s deputy head – was formed.

The ‘mystery shoppers’ were volunteers from each cohort who were interested in improving the quality of lectures at the medical school. These students attended a ninety-minute training session organised and taught by the students in the project team. Once trained, they used a digital platform, managed by the project team, to sign up to review lectures. The team was thereby able to monitor how many students were allocating themselves to lectures and could so ensure an even coverage. After attending the lecture, the ‘mystery shopper’ would, via an online form, give feedback which the team’s Faculty member would review to ensure that the comments on lecturer performance were objective and constructive; support

strategies for improvement, where there were major concerns about quality, could then be sensitively handled.

The project team designed the feedback form to provide both quantitative and qualitative information to the lecturers. The form had five main sections: section one consisted of yes-or-no questions – asking students if the lecturer had clearly identified the learning outcomes, provided a summary slide and made clear how s/he could be contacted; sections two and three, each comprising five or six questions with a rating scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, asked students to focus respectively on content and delivery, using both the scale and an additional box for ‘any other comments’; section four asked students to comment on ‘areas the lecturer did well’ and ‘areas the lecturer could improve on’; section five asked if students had ‘any other comments’ in general.

Lecturers’ involvement in this process was voluntary. Any lecturer unwilling for her/his lecture to be reviewed by mystery shoppers could opt out; those who did agree to be reviewed were asked to complete an additional feedback form, which enabled the project team to ascertain how helpful the lecturers found the feedback to be and whether they would act upon it to improve their future lectures.

The Faculty raised some potential concerns, as detailed below, when the mystery-shopper programme was proposed. The project design took account of these to alleviate their possible impact as much as possible and the programme was initially rolled out as a pilot, to allow the team to assess how problematic they might become. The three main worries forecast were: (1) students’ giving poor quality feedback – the training session was specifically designed to equip students with the skills required to give relevant and constructive feedback; (2) students’ not concentrating in lectures – this was discussed in student training and the team devised a student agreement which ensured that only students in real control of their own studies could participate, since their own learning had always to be their first priority; (3) lecturers might feel threatened about receiving such specific and personalised feedback – giving lecturers the option to opt out helped to lessen this risk and the Mb ChB programme’s deputy head was also in place to vet all feedback and select only what was sensitive, constructive and useful for the lecturers’ subsequent consumption.

Discussion of pedagogy/practice

Student evaluation of teaching has previously been demonstrated to be a reliable and valid source of feedback data (Kogan and Shea, 2007) and consistent with peer feedback (Leamon *et al*, 1999); it has largely been implemented by a) the use of rating scales (Coffey and Gibbs, 2001) to give quantitative data, which is of less use developmentally, or b) focus groups (Kogan and Shea, 2007), which provide richer data but are resource-intensive. We hoped to find a middle course, providing useful developmental feedback within available resources. The typical model has been to gather feedback at the end of a course, which, as we have found, reduces the level of detail about individual lectures (Kogan and Shea, 2007). We needed to be aware of other factors that might influence student feedback, including poor response rate, gender of respondents, year of student and exam scores (Kogan and Shea, 2007; Schiekirka and Raupach, 2015). There is some suggestion that students may rate charisma over content (Rannelli *et al*, 2014) and we specifically addressed this in the training sessions. That students have been found to rate more accurately when anonymous (Afonso *et al*, 2005) gave us the idea of using ‘mystery shoppers’.

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The Faculty expressed a desire to improve the quality of its teaching, but needed to be aware of specific feedback to guarantee the quality of improvements (Gibson *et al*, 2008).

Pedagogical thinking on lecture delivery has in recent years embraced such models as the 'flipped classroom' (Abeysekera and Dawson, 2015) and 'blended learning' (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Active participation and collaborative learning, it has been suggested, result in improved student experience and ratings (Gibson *et al*, *op.cit*, McKenzie *et al*, 2013). We were – and are – keen to promote these models and, as part of their training, participating students, in association with an academic technologist, familiarised themselves with the technologies available to lecturers so that they might, alongside their feedback, be able to suggest specific options for enhancing interactive lecture delivery.

Implementation

Students on the project team created a questionnaire sent to all students on the MB ChB programme to gauge what those students found helpful in lectures. The questionnaire explored student beliefs about the purpose of lectures, the qualities of a good lecture, lecturer interaction with the audience, lecture content plus slides and lecturer deployment of technology. The results of the survey were fed into the training events to guide our 'mystery shoppers' as to what their respective whole cohorts found useful – the intention being that students would integrate these views into their feedback, rather than subjectively providing feedback based on their personal preferences. For example, the questionnaire revealed that 95% of respondents found clinical cases useful; this information was disseminated to our 'mystery shoppers' (Figure 1) in the hope that, where appropriate, they could suggest this to lecturers who had not incorporated clinical cases as an area for improvement.

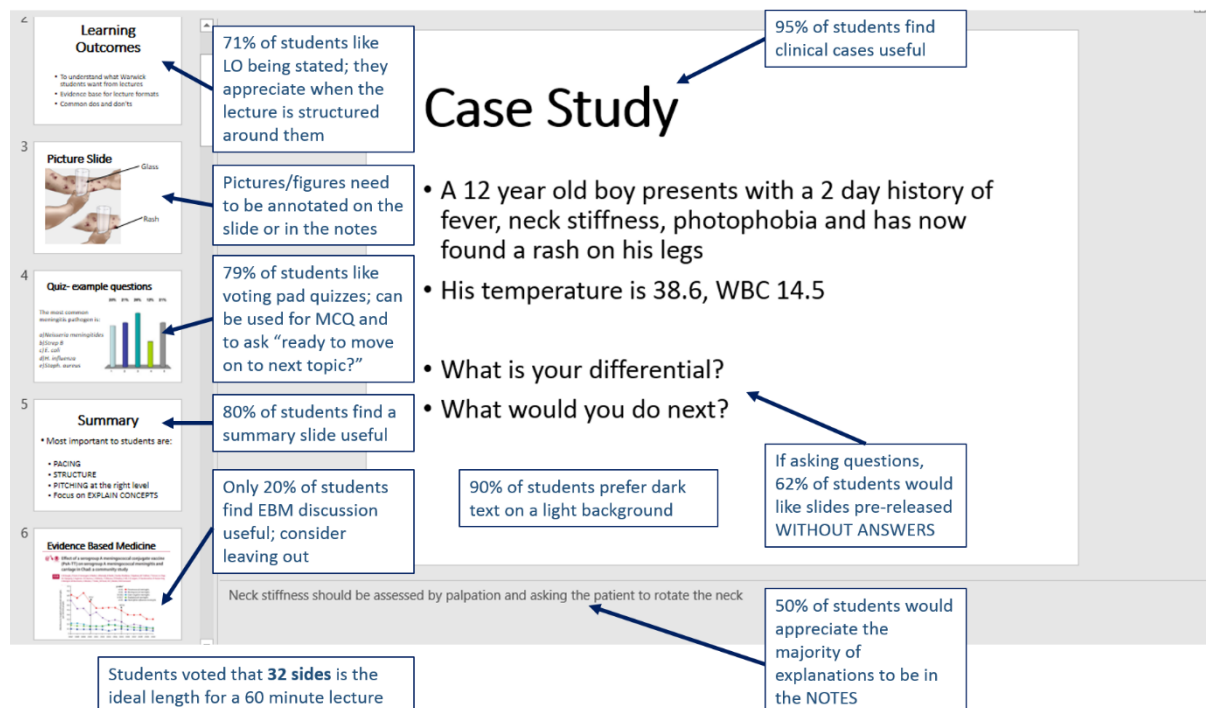


Figure 1. Extract from mystery shopper training showing results of student survey

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The project and training sessions were advertised to each cohort – both on social media and via an email from the deputy head of the MB ChB programme. Interested students were invited to attend a ninety-minute training session led and designed by student members of the project team. The first part of the session was used to explain the ‘mystery shopper’ project – what was being done, why it was being done and how. Following this, the logistics of the project were explained. The concepts of ‘good feedback’ and ‘how to make feedback constructive’ were explored, using discussion of case examples. Next, the feedback forms which the ‘mystery shoppers’ would use to review lectures were explained in detail. In order to make the session more interactive, short internet clips of lectures were shown and students were asked to write their own feedback which was then discussed by the group.

At the end of the training session, students were asked to sign a student agreement, designed by students in the project team, to confirm that they understood what was required of them by taking part. It covered the following areas: (1) allocation of feedback duties – to ensure student-participants did not assign themselves to too many lectures and that students were allocated evenly to lectures; (2) completion of feedback – students signed to agree that, within seven days of the lecture, they would complete the feedback (expressed only from their own perspective) and complete it only if they had attended the whole of the lecture; (3) quality of feedback – students had to agree to provide feedback which was constructive and from which a recipient could learn and thereby improve personal lecture style; (4) academic progress – students were reminded that their own learning should always be their priority; (5) confidentiality – all participants were asked to keep their feedback confidential; (6) review of feedback – students were asked to agree that their feedback be subject to quality-control review by the deputy head of the MB ChB programme before it was passed on anonymously to the lecturer.

A student member of the project team from each cohort was responsible for managing a digital platform through which ‘mystery shoppers’ could assign themselves to review lectures. The team decided that no more than four students should review a single lecture, and ‘mystery shoppers’ were asked to prioritise lectures that had not yet been reviewed by another student. All participant ‘mystery shoppers’ had the link to the online survey feedback form and all their completed feedback was reviewed by the MB ChB deputy head for its quality, as already described here, before it was anonymised and emailed to lecturers. As already mentioned, this process allowed for sensitive professional management of aspects of concern. During the pilot phase, lecturers were asked to complete a short questionnaire – incorporating the opportunity to express any concerns they might have about the process – so that the team could evaluate the helpfulness of the feedback.

Evaluation

In order to evaluate this pilot study, the team needed to assess how successful it had been from the point of view of lecturers and students and to review whether the initial Faculty concerns had been borne out in practice.

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During the pilot study, sixteen lecturers were surveyed about the value of the feedback they had been given and nine lecturers replied (56%). Of the nine, six found the feedback very helpful, one quite helpful and two slightly helpful. No lecturers opted out of receiving feedback. Given that one of the project's anticipated concerns was that lecturers might feel threatened about receiving feedback from students, it is reassuring to know that all nine respondents said they had no concerns about this. Seven of those nine said they would either probably or definitely change something in their lectures in response to the feedback, indicating that helpful student feedback may influence lecturer practice. In taking the project forward, it would be helpful to collect a larger sample of respondents, so as to assess more precisely the degree of 'mystery shopper' feedback success.

Students participating in the project have not reported any adverse effects on their own education, though this requires further evaluation. Owing to the nature of the MB ChB programme, many lecturers are external – usually from NHS partner trusts – and may lecture in this format on only a small number of occasions per year. Consequently, students may not immediately notice a clear improvement in lecture quality, but we anticipate that the student experience will be demonstrably improved from the start of the next academic year.

Lessons learnt

- Following training, students are able to provide good-quality feedback to lecturers.
- 'Mystery shopper' feedback is well received by lecturers; none has opted out.
- Initial indications suggest that 'mystery shopper' feedback may result in changes in lecturer performance.

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