



Two Heads Are Better Than One

Encourage Student Collaboration in the Classroom

by Kelli Smith

Most educators enter the field believing in the power of collaboration and its ability to bolster education for their students. However, as students increasingly focus on their individual goals in the classroom or look to their laptops to learn, educators may struggle to encourage collaborative learning. This overly independent approach can present problems in the efficacy of medical assisting students' education as they prepare to enter a field that necessitates collaboration and cooperation.

Fortunately, educators can turn to collaborative learning—either between two students or in larger groups—by intentionally including it in their curriculum. Educational researchers have found that this approach to education helps students teach one another by addressing misunderstandings and clarifying information, thus benefitting their comprehension in the long run.¹

Consider the following benefits and strategies to help students become more collaborative.

Keep in Mind

Research shows that active, social, contextual, engaging, and student-owned educational experiences can encourage deeper learning. Some of the benefits of collaborative learning include the following:

- Development of higher-level thinking, oral communication, self-management, and leadership skills.
- ...
- Increase in student retention, self-esteem, and responsibility.
- Exposure to and an increase in understanding of diverse perspectives.
- Preparation for social and employment situations.¹

Crucially, collaborative learning helps prepare students for the social environment of a physician's practice, in which they must practice teamwork with other health care workers, including physicians, nurses, and other medical assistants.

"Collaborative learning not only devel-

ops higher-level thinking skills but also boosts students' confidence and self-esteem," says Patricia Boutilier, MBA, MS, BS, EDS, RMA(AMT), CMA (AAMA), a credentialed medical assistant at San Luis Valley Health Regional Medical Center in Alamosa, Colorado. "Working together exposes the students to different viewpoints, fostering understanding and empathy [for] diverse perspectives. It prepares them for real-life social and employment situations."

The ability to collaborate with other students also prepares students to work with patients. "Collaboration in [the] classroom can help students develop a variety of skills that will benefit them in their [careers] as medical assistants," says Amber Powers, AAS, CMA (AAMA), a medical assistant educator at Johnston Community College in Smithfield, North Carolina. "Students learn the importance of communication [and] critical thinking skills, and it improves their self-esteem. These are important qualities for a medical assistant and for patient care."

Additionally, as students may struggle through their programs for various rea-

sons, these collaborative experiences can give students a sense of belonging, aiding in their learning experience, according to Carmen Monk, BS, CMA (AAMA), the medical assisting program director and practicum coordinator at Western Iowa Tech Community College. “When a student feels comfortable, seen, [and] heard, the brain is able to relax and retain information and concepts,” she says.

And yet, despite the numerous benefits of collaboration, the hard part is finding ways for students to meaningfully interact with one another and foster these shared learning experiences.

Brainstorm

Educators can seamlessly incorporate several strategies for encouraging students to collaborate with their peers into their curriculum:

Introduce students. At orientation or

Face the Facts

Collaborative groups must be built and nurtured by educators because students often need to learn how to work effectively with others and as part of a team. Educators must help students understand the fundamental aspects of collaboration in several ways:

- Help students understand the benefits of collaboration and what successful collaboration looks like.
- ...
- Give students time and opportunities within the activity to develop leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills.
- Establish expectations and norms for working together.
- Design ... protocols for handling conflict disagreement so they can resolve issues within their teams.
- Teach students active listening skills.²

on the first day, Monk introduces students to one another through an icebreaker. This breaks down a wall between them immediately, making them more comfortable in the classroom environment.

“When the different sections of [my class] are in the classroom and laboratories, students are already a little familiar with their classmates and then can build relationships,” she says.

Even if educators teach remote or hybrid classes—like Letizia Morales, MS-PAS, CMA (AAMA), a professor and the program coordinator of the medical assisting program at Housatonic Community College, does—they can still encourage students to introduce themselves to one another online.

“We have introduction discussion boards where students are required to write an intro about themselves, as well as post pictures,” says Morales, who is also chair of the school of nursing and health careers at the college. “They then need to comment on two fellow classmates’ [submissions]. This is wonderful because many of them see they have a lot in common with each other.”

Throughout the semester, students may continue to get to know one another, exchange numbers, and even form study groups of their own.

Use real-life scenarios. For Marjorie Michelle Van Duyne, MHSE, CMA (AAMA), a favorite example of student collaboration is when students learn to properly draw blood in class. “They start with the basics and are instructed to lean on each other’s strengths to successfully master this competency,” says Van Duyne, an adjunct medical assisting educator at Wayne Community College in Goldsboro, North Carolina. “It’s fun because I get a real sense of students’ compassion and empathy for one another, which eventually transfers to their compassion and empathy toward future patients.”

Morales has a similar approach to teaching students various medical assisting tasks, including how to do a throat culture. “I have a written rubric, [play] a video demonstration, perform the task on a volunteer, and then have them get into groups of three to practice,” she says. “Each person has a role: medical assistant, patient, and instructor. I find doing it that way covers all learn-

ing styles. They really get comfortable and become a close group by the end of the program. They practice almost every skill on each other.”

Incorporate humor. Van Duyne eases uncomfortable students into learning how to instruct patients how to properly collect a urine specimen by playing funny clips from her favorite TV shows. She feels this helps them prepare to learn about helping patients of all sexes with specimen collection.

“I prefer humor to most other strategies when attempting to break the ice,” says Van Duyne. “It can be difficult for students to get comfortable talking about genitalia, but it’s a necessary part of being a good medical assistant.”

Additionally, incorporating humor can create a bond between the students and educator, making these uncomfortable topics throughout the medical assisting course more surmountable.

Play games. Playing games can be a wonderful way to incorporate fun and make classmates more comfortable with one another, according to Van Duyne and Boutilier.

“I like to use ‘Two Truths and a Lie’ or [other] simple games to help students get to know each other,” says Boutilier. “Using fun games like word association games to introduce new topics and connecting related words or concepts can [also] spark collaboration.”

“Remember, fostering positive relationships among students is crucial for creating a collaborative classroom environment,” she concludes. “By implementing these strategies, you’ll promote teamwork, engagement, and deeper learning experiences!” ♦

References

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2. Burns M. Five strategies to deepen student collaboration. November 22, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2024. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/5-strategies-deepen-student-collaboration-mary-burns>