

Service Learning Goes Virtual in the Viral World

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The Experience

The current healthcare environment obliges medical schools to include a principle of community partnership within a medical education. This should provide medical students the skills to practice in a rapidly changing health environment.¹ Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, medical schools were challenged with providing community engaged learning to their students.^{2,3} Service learning, a learning experience that combines community service with preparation, planning, engagement, and reflection, is an example of the community-engaged learning that faced these challenges during the pandemic.⁴ Service learning is a required activity at our medical school and fits well with the mission of our school, which includes advancing the well-being and health of our community through patient-centered care. Our school aims to train excellent clinicians who are compassionate and will serve as advocates for their communities.

The middle school where we performed our service learning was like most other schools in the country this fall. In August, the school announced its plan to roll out a virtual curriculum. However, a group of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders experienced a curriculum that was quite different. Twice a week, these students met virtually with two medical students and experienced what it meant to be a professional healthcare worker. We implemented a theme of "Training to Live as a Healthy Professional" - a play on words to teach the students about being a "professional of being healthy", and also to serve as an exposure to healthcare as a profession. We hoped to encourage the students to living healthy and to give them the tools to enter a healthcare profession. Many of the students are from underserved communities and never considered this profession as an option.

We structured our time to focus on "training to think like medical professionals", with interactive scenarios to understand clinical reasoning, integrating valuable nutritional and exercise lessons, and included a session on approaching the challenges of telemedicine.

This infusion into the virtual curriculum provided a great opportunity for the students to interact and learn through an exciting medium. Previously, others have reported that learning through an online platform may present challenges with interaction and stimulation.⁵ We aimed to avoid these challenges through question-provoking lessons, quiz contests, and role playing. The lessons learned also resonated with the children and showed them a bright promise for their futures. In a time when the pandemic presented many challenges, these students gained valuable opportunities, lifelong lessons, and new friendships.

Working with these students allowed us to take a step back from learning about the medical field and instead, teach about it. The students showed us that it is never too early to begin understanding the basics of biology and to be introduced to its real-world clinical implications such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and rare genetic diseases. We found that teaching, even such young minds, gave us a chance to practice communication with those that have not been learning medicine daily - a glimpse of what the future holds for us. The importance of medical students teaching children and thus sharpening teaching skills has been emphasized by others previously.⁶ We similarly felt that this experience allowed us to assume a teaching role that will aid us in the future and improve our overall clinical and mentoring capabilities.

We came out of this experience with renewed enthusiasm towards involvement in the community. We want to impart the idea that once we are doctors, we should ensure that our patients feel comfortable to participate in discussions regarding their health and medical diagnoses, and most importantly, to remember that as doctors we will also be teachers. At a time when medical disease and treatments are at the forefront of every conversation, educating our children, patients, and communities is of the utmost importance.

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