Commentary: teaching the teacher—spaced education as a novel approach to teaching interns to teach

Rebecca M. Minter, M.D.*

Departments of Surgery and Medical Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

In the present study, “Using Spaced Education to Teach Interns About Teaching Skills,” Pernar et al investigated the use of electronic distribution of content to interns with succinct teaching pearls on a weekly basis. Although the study was underpowered and focused on 3 distinct teaching skills—effective delivery of feedback, teaching and learning principles, and dissemination of core clerkship content to students—it provides evidence that a strategy of spaced education may be an effective approach for efficiently delivering this material to interns and engaging them in the teaching process. Given the expectation of the Liaison Committee on Medical Education that we provide our residents with formal training in teaching, coupled with a significant reduction in postgraduate year 1 duty hours, an approach such as that described in this study is very appealing. In this era of less time for interns to both receive content and to participate in teaching activities, a focus on just-in-time teaching skills is critical, and the described spaced education technique allows an emphasis on this approach and minimizes the time required to deliver the content to interns.

Pedagogically, the approach of distributed practice in delivering the feedback and learning pearls and reminders to teach weekly is also sound. Although we typically think of the importance of distributed practice for technical skills acquisition, this concept almost certainly applies here as well. Delivery of content and teaching tips in small “digestible chunks” allows interns to better incorporate these skills by practicing them regularly. This approach is generally more likely to create a lasting change in behavior, with true integration of the skills desired. Given that the pearls and tips that were delivered to the interns in a random rotating manner over the course of the year were varied in their focus and direction, one wonders if the increased teaching activity and positive effects observed were the result of the weekly reminders to teach, or the specific content delivered in the e-mails. In future studies, it would be important to query whether the specific skills the investigators are trying to impart to interns with respect to teaching skills were learned and incorporated or if the spaced education simply served as a reminder to pause and spend time teaching the students.

In addition, given that our current surgical interns are predominantly part of the millennial generation, the authors and others considering this approach of spaced education should perhaps consider the use of text messaging as a more effective delivery vehicle for this content. In general, this generation uses e-mail much less frequently, and an e-mail pearl may well be received at a time when an intern or a resident is not with a student learner. Considering the “just-in-time” approach that this type of methodology supports, delivering these pearls and reminders via text messaging may actually lead to even greater improvements in teaching and providing feedback than that observed using an e-mail delivery system.

In general, interns are the most approachable and empathetic teachers for student learners, as they are closest to students’ stage of learning. In many instances, they are also better able to break down basic patient management and technical skills for students, because these skills are not yet as automated for interns as they are for faculty members or even senior residents; thus, interns can often better break down a skill into its component steps. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the surgical education community to...
provide these junior teachers with the skills and tools they need to be successful in this role. Using an approach as described here allows a low-cost means to provide this education to interns, while emphasizing that this activity is valued and respected. Further studies evaluating innovative approaches for providing residents with formal training in teaching such as the spaced education approach described by Pernar et al are needed.