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Feedback as dialogue for faculty: From peer review to peer-to-peer coaching

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There is genuine dialogue—no matter whether spoken or silent—where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. There is technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And there is monologue disguised as dialogue, in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their resources.

Martin Buber

Recently, medical education has focused on the notion of competency-based growth. As a result, most medical trainees are meant to be provided with structured feedback based on direct observation that focuses not only on acquiring knowledge but also on developing dynamic skills through the achievement of educational milestones.¹ It is understood that for continuous improvement, feedback is a critical element in the clinical training environment.² Indeed, students, residents and fellows consider detailed, prompt, high-quality feedback from faculty, and more recently from peers, necessary for their development and success.³ Feedback from mentors or peers can promote a culture of improvement toward expertise, but its delivery requires the foundation of an educational alliance—where those giving and receiving feedback share a common goal, mutual trust, a strong basis for communication and a feeling of responsibility toward the other.⁴ When feedback is unidirectional and not interactive, its significance often goes unheard and unheeded.⁵ Additionally, feedback correlates with objective performance when the provider

and the recipient know each other well, and the quality of assessment is increased by building a relationship with the recipient of feedback.⁶

When feedback is unidirectional and not interactive, its significance often goes unheard and unheeded.

Although competency-based feedback is now stressed at every level during training, it dwindles as clinicians become independent in their practice. In this issue of Medical Education, Watling et al. focus on peer review, one integral source of feedback that is offered, at least to those engaged in scholarship, even to those who have completed their formal training. Despite the shortcomings inherent to peer review, its effectiveness for improving the quality of submitted work has been emphasised.⁷ Given its benefits, why do we limit peer feedback for faculty to just peer review of scholarly work? And what could we apply from the peer review process to facilitate competency-based growth for faculty in other areas? Continuing medical education (CME), after all, often fails to capture growth toward mastery^{8,9} faculty self-assessments correlate just as poorly with evaluations provided by others as do trainee self-assessments, further highlighting the need for external or peer-to-peer advising for faculty.¹⁰

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Turning our eyes in that direction, there are several lessons we can gain from Watling et al.'s article to expand peer feedback for faculty and enhance competency-based growth after training. First, Watling et al. showcase that researchers' faith in peer review decreases when they feel their reviewer has merely followed a checklist for quality assurance on behalf of a journal and has not addressed the person behind the page. Their research suggests that interviewees respond best to peer reviewers whose commentary is specific and delivered with a tone of developmental intent. Additionally, one aspect of peer review that their interviewees emphasise as most valuable is its ability to allow voices to dialogue, to build a consensus of perspective and to increase the quality of work delivered by a scientific community. Lastly, Watling et al. highlight the professional obligation to engage with feedback and the challenge of doing so in the peer review process. They look to a cultural shift that situates feedback as a shared responsibility.

Additionally, one aspect of peer review that their interviewees emphasise as most valuable is its ability to allow voices to dialogue, to build a consensus of perspective and to increase the quality of work delivered by a scientific community.

These themes defining valuable peer-to-peer feedback in the peer review process can be extrapolated more broadly to feedback in other areas. In order to facilitate continuous improvement in rapidly changing fields and highlight feedback as a shared responsibility, peer-to-peer feedback should be expanded.

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In light of the limits of peer review described in the article, however, it is possible that peer-to-peer faculty coaching is one domain where such feedback is more achievable with methods from trainee feedback being extrapolated for this goal. At the faculty level it may seem that the relationship-building necessary for quality feedback would be time intensive, but trainees have demonstrated that a supportive culture can be fostered with minimal contact if the person providing feedback takes a genuine interest in the recipient and focuses on his or her goals.¹¹ What's more, the research of Watling et al. suggests that high-quality feedback would reinforce faculty's sense of self-efficacy or autonomy. This could be achieved through an emphasis on peer-to-peer feedback as a coaching activity, rather than as a form of assessment of a single observed performance. Faculty would likely feel seen as professionals if their improvement over time were highlighted through an iterative process of facilitated self-reflection, both because of the collaborative nature of the relationship and through the supported identification and achievement of individual faculty goals.¹²

This could be achieved through an emphasis on peer-to-peer feedback as a coaching activity, rather than as a form of assessment of a single observed performance.

At first glance, it may be challenging to envision how peer coaching would be incorporated structurally into faculty development, and it might seem that an institution would face numerous barriers in implementing such a programme, from providing training in peer coaching skills to providing faculty with dedicated time for direct observation. However, if peer-to-peer coaching were framed as a

strongly held cultural value, as the peer review process is described in the paper of Watling et al., engaging with it could similarly become not only a rite of passage, but an element of professional identity.

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