Learning objectives

- understand when role modeling should precede practice
- describe a “teacher talks” approach for modeling skills that are new to a learner

Introduction

Role modeling is critical in teaching communication skills. Learners need to see that the teacher ‘walks the walk’ that they recommend to others. Without this level of authenticity, your recommendations about best communication practice are likely to be ignored.

The role modeling you do works on at least 5 different levels: demonstrating a specific skill (“demonstrating expert practice”); observing things as an expert that a novice doesn’t pick up (“observing from an expert’s perspective”); demonstrating how everyday reflection is an essential practice of being a great communicator (“demonstrating metacognition”); explaining to a learner how they can go about learning or refining a particular skill (“using scaffolding in the learning process”); and finally by encouraging a learner’s personal development (“stimulating personal development”). In this module we will discuss each of these levels briefly.

Demonstrating expert practice (“teacher talks”)

As a faculty member, your behavior in itself tells learners important implicit messages about how they should communicate. In addition, as an expert, you can demonstrate a level of practice that a learner may not have realized is possible. For example, many students have never seen an effective empathic response. Thus, teaching by demonstrating expert practice helps them see the kinds of behaviors you want them to learn, and it sets a standard for the level of skill to which they should aspire. Effective demonstrations can help learners move from a novice perception that communication skills are magical to a more advanced perspective that communication is composed of specific skills they can practice. Also, you can use demonstration almost anytime you are seeing a patient with a learner.

1. Goal setting. Although the teacher may be doing the talking, you should still negotiate learning goals because novice learners don’t know what to watch for during the interaction. The topic that you choose should be negotiated with the learner based on the situation (e.g. what is likely to come up), their question (I am not sure how to build rapport with someone I do not know) and your view regarding what would be most educational for the learner (e.g. you think the learner has trouble being empathic so you might ask them to notice your empathic statements). In general, one should have the learner watch for only 1-2 tasks initially as it is often hard for them to observe and track specific details.
2. After coming out of the room, ask the student what she observed, related to the learning goal. It is likely that the student will be positive (both because you are skilled and because you are the more powerful person in the interaction). If you have time after discussing the learning goal, you ask about observations more generally, such as “what skills that worked”.

3. If the conversation did not go as you expected, you might discuss what you thought did not go well or how you felt you could have been better. It is more likely that you can do this than a learner who would be feeling like they are criticizing an attending.

4. At the end it may be helpful to summarize one important teaching point to take away from the encounter. In addition, see if you can get a commitment from the learner to try the skill in their next encounter and discuss any barriers that may interfere with its performance.

**Observing from an expert perspective**

Role models also point out what they are observing to learners at times that are not linked to learner goals. For example, an attending might say after an encounter, “Did you notice how the patient was shifting back and forth in her seat? I think that was evidence of being nervous, even though she said she was doing fine.” As a role model, you can volunteer these observations to your learners when: (a) you have observed a good example of something, (b) when you’re not sure the learners understood the example, and (c) you have the time. The observation can be tied to your behavior: “The reason that I continued to make empathic statements is that I noticed her calming down every time I acknowledged how hard this is.”

**Metacognition as an everyday skill**

A skill that advanced practitioners use is metacognition, which is a term from learning sciences referring to reflection about the process of learning and practicing. For example an attending might comment in response to a learner question that “I had this hunch that he might have a difficult time talking about his own goals, so even though I decided to ask him, I was ready with some things to suggest as possibilities when he came up short.” The importance of showing how you use metacognition is twofold: first, it demonstrates to novice learners how metacognition works as a skilled practitioner makes a complicated judgment, and second, it shows that metacognition is an integral part of expert practice. Novice learners often assume that when they know more content that decisions will be simpler. In actuality, skilled learners use complicated patterns of thinking that enable them to examine more possibilities in less time, and metacognition is the way they build those patterns.

**Using scaffolding in the learning process**

Role models can also facilitate learning by describing how they went about learning a new skill. For example, an attending might describe how he trained himself to be more aware of patient emotion by assigning himself to notice one emotion every visit, and writing briefly about what he observed in a journal once a week. These activities could be called ‘scaffolding’. Like the scaffolds that support buildings while they are being constructed, an observation and journaling assignment can support development of a new skill. Once the skill is developed, the journaling is not necessary in the same way, just as when the building is complete, the scaffolding can be taken away.

**Stimulating personal development**

Finally, role models can engage learners in discussions that facilitate personal development. If the learner is to use himself as an instrument, a certain degree of calibration is important, and this calibration comes through personal development. We commonly observe learners making strides in areas such as commitment to a kind of work or topic, understandings about how their own life story influences and enriches their work, and aspirations about what kind of physician they want to be. While these conversations often take place outside of formal learning situations, learners tell use that they are incredibly valuable and can be turning points in a career.