

How learners progress

is there a developmental sequence of skill acquisition?

Conceptual model for learner development re: communication skills

In our own teaching of communication skills, we have found that encouraging learner development requires some idea about how learners progress. What are the stages of skill development? We haven't found anything in the literature that really addresses this, so we have laid out a conceptual model based on our own experience. We offer it here as a tool for teachers, and to stimulate further discussion and research on the topic.

These domains reflect elements of a communication event between physician and patient (or family). They function in a dynamic and integrated way during real-time patient interviews. However, for the purposes of teaching, we have isolated the domains and described a developmental trajectory within each. Teachers can use the concepts in the trajectory to help identify where a learner is currently working and where they might go next in their learning and skill development.

A teacher can also use the domains to make choices about where to focus during a teaching encounter or feedback session (or may guide learner goal setting within the domains). When making these choices, a teacher may use one domain to move toward another (e.g. start with a cognitive skill with the end goal of facilitating reflection on emotion if going for the emotion directly would potentially be non-productive for that learner/group at that time).

A. Cognitive skills related to communication

1. recognizing what communication task you face
2. identifying/knowing a cognitive map/approach to use
3. customizing the map for the particular situation

B. Ability to recognize and respond to patient emotions (empathy)

1. recognizing emotion
2. naming and acknowledging emotion
3. using emotion data to guide discussion in the encounter

C. Ability to recognize and respond to emotions in self (self-awareness and self-regulation)

1. recognizing emotion
2. naming and acknowledging emotion
3. handling our emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with task at hand

D. Social and group skills

1. recognizes membership in group (turn taking, following ground rules)

2. offers feedback and suggestions that facilitate learning
3. actively moves group toward cooperation/teamwork (either through participation or leadership)

E. Motivation

1. Does not yet prioritize skills (communication/emotion) ('why should I bother')
2. Willing to experiment or try new skills ('don't know if this is worthwhile but I'm willing to give it a shot')
3. Embraces skills as a critical part of doctoring ("this is the kind of doctor I want to be")

This is our current working model, and we've found it very useful in thinking about our own teaching. We provide it here with some major caveats. It hasn't been formally validated, and we don't know whether all these milestones are recognizable to other investigators. But we provide it here to make our own approach to teaching communication more transparent--for the science of teaching to progress, we need more conceptual work, and we need to know more about what learners think.