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SHORT REPORT



Collaborative peer review process as an informal interprofessional learning tool: Findings from an exploratory study

Jae Yung Kwon ^a, Laura Yvonne Bulk^b, Zarina Giannone^c, Sarah Liva^a, Bubli Chakraborty^a, and Helen Brown^a

^aSchool of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; ^bDepartment of Occupational Science & Occupational Therapy, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; ^cDepartment of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

Despite numerous studies on formal interprofessional education programmes, less attention has been focused on informal interprofessional learning opportunities. To provide such an opportunity, a collaborative peer review process (CPRP) was created as part of a peer-reviewed journal. Replacing the traditional peer review process wherein two or more reviewers review the manuscript separately, the CPRP brings together students from different professions to collaboratively review a manuscript. The aim of this study was to assess whether the CPRP can be used as an informal interprofessional learning tool using an exploratory qualitative approach. Eight students from Counselling Psychology, Occupational and Physical Therapy, Nursing, and Rehabilitation Sciences were invited to participate in interprofessional focus groups. Data were analysed inductively using thematic analysis. Two key themes emerged, revealing that the CPRP created new opportunities for interprofessional learning and gave practice in negotiating feedback. The results reveal that the CPRP has the potential to be a valuable interprofessional learning tool that can also enhance reviewing and constructive feedback skills.

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Introduction

Interprofessional collaboration (IPC) is widely recognized as an essential skill to foster in healthcare professionals to improve healthcare quality and client safety (e.g. Brock et al., 2013). However, despite a plethora of formal structured education programmes (e.g. clinical placements) to promote IPC (Brewer, Flavell, & Jordon, 2017; Lapkin, Levett-Jones, & Gilligan, 2013), there has been less attention to informal learning experiences. According to Nisbet, Lincoln, and Dunn (2013), these types of informal learning experiences allow health professionals to develop implicit and personal knowledge about other professions and their perspectives, which is an essential part of being a competent interprofessional clinician. In an effort to increase informal shared learning experiences, students at a large Canadian university introduced an innovative collaborative peer review process (CPRP) in a peer-reviewed health professional journal. The CPRP involves two students from different healthcare professions meeting to review a manuscript together on topics that include healthcare policy and clinical practice from an interprofessional perspective. In contrast, the traditional peer review process involves two or more individuals reviewing a manuscript separately. This article provides a preliminary evaluation of whether students perceive CPRP as an informal interprofessional learning tool.

Methods

An exploratory qualitative approach was employed using focus groups as this form of data collection can stimulate similarities

and diversities of experiences amongst participants (Speziale, Streubert, & Carpenter, 2011). It was also recognized that focus groups were suitable for student participants, as they provide a safe environment to share their thoughts and experiences.

Data collection

We used a purposive sampling approach to achieve diversification of the healthcare graduate programmes. Participants who completed the CPRP were invited to participate through the editorial board by e-mail. This resulted in one counselling psychology student, two occupational therapy students, two nursing students, one physical therapy student, and two rehabilitation sciences students. Data were gathered using two interprofessional focus group sessions with four participants per each 1-hour session moderated by a trained facilitator who was familiar with the CPRP. The sessions were semi-structured with questions that focused on the extent and degree of the learning experience when participants were reviewing a manuscript together, perceived benefits and limitations of the CPRP, and recommendations for improvement. The focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were checked for accuracy. Each participant received a \$25 honorarium.

Analysis

Focus group transcripts were read and analysed by the facilitator and the researchers. Thematic coding was informed by

hermeneutic phenomenology because it allowed an in-depth understanding of how participants perceive the CPRP and how they make sense of this experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The transcripts were initially coded and grouped together by similarities and differences in participants' learning experiences, and final themes were generated through consensus. Rigor was addressed through member checking during the interview and verifying the synopsis of the interview by the facilitator.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University's human research ethics committee (H14-00710). Quotations from any individual participant were not identified to ensure the maintenance of anonymity.

Findings

Two key themes emerged from the data analysis, revealing that the CPRP can be used to create opportunities for interprofessional learning and give practice in negotiating feedback.

Opportunities for interprofessional learning

The CPRP creates opportunities for students to engage in informal interprofessional learning and broaden their knowledge about other healthcare professionals' perspectives. For example, students described learning about how certain terms may be used in their partner-reviewers' professional programmes:

She [partner reviewer] pointed out the different terminology that was used by the author and that was helpful. It was something I learned.

Other students commented on how they read only profession-specific articles, and being involved with the CPRP allowed them to learn about, appreciate, and understand the roles of other health professionals:

...even just reading the manuscripts was good because...I was not aware of...different types of [work] nurses do. So just reading that helped me to understand more about the role of nurses in the health field.

Some students also described having casual conversation while collaborating on the review of a manuscript, which provided additional opportunities for partner reviewers to engage and reflect upon one's role in relation to the other in an informal environment. Thus, students felt that the CPRP created various opportunities, which may not have been possible in more formal learning environments or within a profession-specific pedagogy.

Practice in negotiating feedback

Students also described how the different types of negotiations involved in the peer-to-peer processes may facilitate future interactions with other healthcare professionals:

...knowing what each person's peer reviewer expertise is and their experience reviewing [was helpful]. Then you could come at it as a

team...you might lean on one person for their expertise on this and they might lean on you for your expertise.

In addition, most students felt that negotiations through the CPRP resulted in a final review that provided a more comprehensive and consistent feedback:

If you get feedback from two different reviewers and it contradicts each other, who's right? When we meet and talk together to figure out what the 'best answer is', that's really beneficial for the end product.

Generally, students reported that the CPRP may improve authors' experiences with peer reviews by providing them with feedback that is easier to integrate and apply by virtue of being free of contradictions:

It's hard to know how to work with different reviewers in contradiction with the other. In [collaborative peer review], we didn't have differences of opinion but raised different points and put them all together for a more consistent feedback.

Implicitly and explicitly, students also raised the possibility of peer mentorship during the CPRP depending on the reviewer's background and experience. Thus, these findings suggest that the CPRP can facilitate future interactions by helping students to negotiate their different yet unique contributions as a cohesive team.

Discussion

The majority of students acknowledged that the CPRP provided an informal space for them to learn about other professions and their perspectives, facilitated by the focused common goal of providing a quality review of a manuscript. This is consistent with previous studies showing that experiences of shared learning can help students appreciate both the similar and unique approaches that other health profession brings, which may result in enhanced collaboration skills (Honan, Fahs, Talwalkar, & Kayingo, 2015; Wilhelmsson et al., 2009). However, despite the potential benefits of the CPRP, students suggested areas to augment the collaborative learning experience. For example, students perceived lack of structure and insufficient guidelines for conducting the review. There is a perceived need to develop clearer guidelines to support the structure and nature of the collaborations (e.g. having at least one face-to-face interaction between reviewers with icebreaker introductions that include discussions about their profession and pairing reviewers over extended periods to help develop relationships). After incorporating suggestions for improvement, further evaluation of its impact is planned outside the journal context (e.g. whether the CPRP can be incorporated in an interprofessional workshop or classroom).

This exploratory study had several limitations. For example, this study only captures perceived knowledge and attitudes towards students of other professions. Therefore, it may not be possible to infer how this study relates to future learning experiences or the impact on overall communication or collaboration skills of participating students. Another limitation was that the nature of the

interactions was not consistent (e.g. online versus face-to-face) which may have affected the learning experiences of the students differently.

Concluding comments

Participating students from different professions perceived the CPRP to have the potential to be a valuable, informal learning exercise, which encourages learning from other professions and overall enhances the reviewing skills of student. Thus, the findings of this evaluation highlight CPRP as a potential opportunity for IPC and learning.

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Declaration of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the writing and content of the article.

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ORCID

Jae Yung Kwon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0336-7348>

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