

GRATEFULLY YOURS March/April 1996

A Poster Exercise Teaches First-Year Medical Students Grateful Med Retrieval Skills

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"Students applaud this fun and 'low pressure' exercise; faculty find it a great way to organize research"

As is widely recognized, modern curricula appointed for professional education are beginning to include exercises designed to develop communication skills.¹ However, what has become a popular medium for exchange at professional meetings, the poster, is not addressed by any curriculum of which we are aware. In the medical field, students learn these skills best "when instruction is viewed as aiding in the resolution of a real information need."²

We create a "real need" for information by assigning students a topic to research and asking them to present their findings as a poster in a simulated meeting. Students, in groups of four, are assigned a faculty preceptor.

The preceptor either assigns a research topic or encourages the students to select their own. Since the poster session is part of a six-week neuroscience course, the topic must address an area of neuroscience and be of current interest so students could find entries in MEDLINE and other NLM databases via Grateful Med.

At the outset, students receive two hours of training on Grateful Med by the staff of our medical library. In the training session, librarian Molly Youngkin, assistant professor, shows how to use GM software, and how to organize and enhance searches using Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) and limit retrieval through Boolean logic. Once trained, most students can conduct fairly sophisticated searches and each group is given a password for GM and access to computers. For those who want extra instruction, GM includes an online tutorial. Some students revert to more familiar database retrieval systems. However, we stress that at least some of their searches be via Grateful Med because after graduation they can access medical information from databases offered by the National Library of Medicine. NLM databases are available by telephone or on the Internet wherever they set up practice anywhere in the U.S. and in most places abroad.

Students Find Grateful Med Easy

We choose Grateful Med for several reasons:

1. Students find it easy to learn to use.
2. It is an avenue to access MEDLINE and other important NLM databases.
3. Grateful Med will be available to students at low cost after they leave the medical center.

After searching for and reading articles of interest, students select the topic they wish to present in a poster. Instruction in how to design and construct posters is given in a paper by John Woolsey.³ A videotape lecture by Woolsey is also available for training in poster communications techniques.

Emulating a Medical Society Meeting

Capstone of the poster project is a simulated professional meeting called "Topics in Neuroscience." It is important that students understand that the function of the poster session at a professional meeting is to stimulate discussion. Otherwise, students may feel chagrined when people ask questions about material they thought they covered in their posters. Deans, department chairpersons, faculty, librarians, and students' families are invited to attend this simulated meeting of the Society for Neuroscience. Preceptors circulate among the poster displays as judges. They question and discuss the material with the student groups. Each assigns a score (from 1-10) to the posters judged. These scores count toward the students' course grades.

"We Will Participate Again"

In February, we held our latest poster session in the atrium of the University of Nebraska Medical Center building to attract others from the student body. All preceptors said they enjoyed the exercise and would participate again. The comment of one summarizes our goal: "This exercise is a great way to teach students how to research and organize a topic. And it introduces a way of presenting findings formally."

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Footnotes:

(1)Physicians for the twenty-first century. Report of the Project Panel on the General Professional Education of the Physician and College Preparation for Medicine. J Med Educ 1984 Nov;59(11 Pt 2): 1- 208

(2)Pao ML;et al.Student use of MEDLINE: an analysis of the effects of experience and searching knowledge and skills on retrieval in a clinical situation. Proc Annu Symp Comput Appl Med Care 1992;;478-82

(3)Woolsey JD. Combating poster fatigue: how to use visual grammar and analysis to effect better visual communications. Trends Neurosci 1989 Sept;12(9):325-32

Part II Lessons of Poster Sessions

by Piyush Rajurkar, Student University of Nebraska Medical Center

"It happened last year in my first month of medical school and it turned out to be one of the most worthwhile educational experiences I've had. We are sitting in our neuroscience class, when Dr. Mann announces that would be attending a meeting of the Society for Neuroscience and that we are responsible for making a poster session presentation. To our relief we learn that the meeting is not actual, but simulated. However, the poster session is real enough and we have less than five weeks to get ready for it. We split into groups of four. Dr. Mann passes out a written description of what's expected and assigns us to a faculty preceptor. One of the first lessons I learn on this assignment is how to work in a small group; everybody has some idea of a topic. Finally, we settle on Tourette Syndrome, an extreme and persistent childhood tic, because of the interesting profile of symptoms: incessant coughing, barking, grunting and (usually in boys) involuntary cursing. The next lesson is: How do we research this topic and combine our research? Most of us know about MEDLINE and other medical information databases from problem-based assignments in other courses. But if we need it, we are offered a couple hours of training on Grateful Med, which is easier to use. Here is our chance to use resources which will help us through school and in practice later on. Then, so that our research is not redundant, we divide our exhibit into a natural order of four sections: Introduction/history, etiology, diagnosis, and treatment. For visual effect we use two graphics: frequency of symptoms and efficacy of medications. The day of the meeting comes and we are ready. In describing our poster board to viewers and learning of their experiences, we gain a new understanding of the importance of cutting-edge research in medicine. During the course of the "meeting" I am curious to see the posters of other groups. Wandering through the exhibits, I learn new facts about a number of other disorders. In our case, I hope that viewers who see our poster exhibit learn that Tourette Syndrome is not a smart alec reaction but a disease. If not treated as such, this severe tic disrupts the child's education and his relationships with teachers, schoolmates, and parents."