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Introduction

Pharmacy students in their first professional year (P1) often struggle to adapt to the demands of the rigorous curriculum. The integrated renal and cardiovascular courses at the University of Rhode Island (URI) facilitate learning of renal and cardiovascular disorders and the medications used to treat them. The courses are challenging but important to the students' future practice. There have been no studies assessing the impact or usefulness of using online chat rooms to supplement traditional teaching methods for pharmacy students.

Objectives

The objective of the online chat room was to provide an additional resource that students could use to clarify course material. We hypothesized that the chat room would serve as a useful supplemental learning tool for pharmacy students.

Methods

The online chat room function of the course management system at URI (Sakai) was offered throughout the spring semester to P1 students. Two students in their third professional year (P3) collaborated with professors throughout the course to determine the optimal time and date to hold the chat room. The time and date were communicated to students via Sakai announcements and email. In the chat room, P1 students submitted questions in a real-time list format. The P3 students or professor then responded to the questions and posed questions to the students to encourage discussion.

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to fill out a brief, electronic survey via Survey Monkey. The survey asked 12 questions about the chat room using a 5-point Likert scale, including asking if they attended the chat room and, if they did not, the reason(s) why, as well as the impact of the chat room on their learning. The survey was approved by the URI Institutional Review Board.

Results

- 120 students were enrolled in the integrated renal and cardiovascular courses
- 63 students responded to the survey
 - 53% response rate
 - 60 students viewed the archived chat room (95%)
 - 44 students attended the live chat room (70%)

Table 1. Student Responses to Survey Questions

	Agreed or Strongly Agreed, n=61
Encouraged me to stay up-to-date in my work, n (%)	24 (39)
Encouraged student-faculty interaction outside of class, n (%)	47 (77)
Helped me learn more by asking questions and seeking answers, n (%)	38 (62)
Facilitated my learning, n (%)	43 (70)
Clarified material that I did not understand, n (%)	50 (82)
Encouraged me to ask questions about the material that I did not ask during the lecture, n (%)	39 (64)

Table 2. Students Who Attended the Live Chat Room Versus Students Who Did Not Attend

	Attended the live chat room (n=44)	Did not attend the live chat room (n=17)
Encouraged me to stay up-to-date in my work, n (%)	19 (43)	5 (29)
Encouraged student-faculty interaction outside of class, n (%)	33 (74)	14 (82)
Helped me learn more by asking questions and seeking answers, n (%)	30 (68)	8 (47)
Facilitated my learning, n (%)	33 (75)	10 (59)
Clarified material that I did not understand, n (%)	39 (89)	11 (65)
Encouraged me to ask questions about the material that I did not ask during the lecture, n (%)	32 (71)	7 (43)

Table 3. Open-Ended Comments from Students

The chat room was really useful as a reference while studying. I didn't attend it as it was happening, but I certainly used it later on in my studying.
There were times when the chat room was very helpful, but there were other times that it wasn't useful, such as when the correct professor was not facilitating it, or questions weren't answered clearly or concisely.
The tips that the chat room facilitators sometimes provided even without being directly asked by students were helpful!
There were some unnecessary comments and joking around, which made it difficult to find information I saw prior.
Keep up the chat rooms, possibly more frequent rather than just before exam.
Make it closer to the exam, not four days before the exam.
Not all of the professors that lectured were in the chat so it was hard to ask questions about what was asked in another professor's lecture.
It is a nice resource to have. Professors running it were fairly accommodating to student schedules, which was appreciated. I never asked any questions directly but being present in the chat room allowed me to use other students' questions to broaden my spectrum of thought for the material.

- A large percentage of the respondents attended the live chat room and even more viewed the archived discussion.
- Students' attitudes toward the chat room, based on comments and survey results, were positive.
- More students who attended the live chat room agreed with the questions on the survey compared to those who did not attend the live chat room.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the survey, the online chat room is a useful adjunct that P1 students can use to enhance their understanding of the renal and cardiovascular course material. Overall, the chat room encouraged students to stay up-to-date in their studying, encouraged student-faculty interaction outside of class, helped the students learn more by asking their own questions, and facilitated their learning. In addition, the chat room clarified material the students did not understand and encouraged them to ask questions about the material. The feedback provided by the students who participated will be used in the future to further improve the chat room.