



Perspective / Opinion

Learning Communities and the 5 Rs at MCW-Central Wisconsin

By Jeff Fritz, PhD and Casey Balson, M1

Dr. Fritz and Ms. Balson share their thoughts on the foundational principles and first-hand experiences of the MCW-Central Wisconsin learning communities ...

From Dr. Fritz:

I'd like to share my experiences with learning communities at MCW-Central Wisconsin as a highly rewarding option to incorporate Sarina Schrager's *5 R's of Curriculum for Millennial Learners* ([WMJ 120\(1\):5-6, April 2021](#)). In case you have yet to read the article, Schrager's 5 R's are:

- Research-based
- Relevance
- Rationale
- Relaxed
- Rapport

At MCW- Central Wisconsin all first- and second-year students have been engaged in learning communities over the past two years. Each learning community—we use the term “Navigation Teams”—selects its team's name and each contains roughly eight students with two coaches. The teams share many similarities with the 4C Coaching teams at MCW- Milwaukee and MCW-Green Bay.

Prior to establishing our Navigation Teams, I was a little surprised to learn of the wealth of research-based methods supporting learning communities and coaching. The [Learning Communities Institute](#) has been sharing its findings for the past eighteen years at its annual conferences. Its members publish in a variety of medical education journals. Additionally, the AMA has recently promoted coaching, coaching publications, and coaching structures across the medical education continuum.

The role of coaching and learning communities is even present in aspects of developing [Master Adaptive Learners](#) within medicine. As such, there was more than sufficient research to guide development of coaches and the Navigation Team process to support two cohorts of twenty learners into multiple Navigation Teams of eight students on the Central Wisconsin campus. Much like the 4C programs at MCW-Milwaukee and MCW-Green Bay, one of the strengths of the Navigation Team process is to focus on relevance (mattering).

Early in the first year, our experiences tend to be focused on topics such as self-awareness, vulnerability, wellness, and adapting to medical school. As the communities' progress through medical school longitudinally, topics shift toward professional identity formation—adjusting foundational learning toward clinical learning—shaping discussions on clinical dilemmas as well as providing learner support during longitudinal clinical experiences. Within these communities, learners and coaches focus on the rational and relevance of the medical educational experience with its focus on exploring both group and individual needs. While coaches serve to guide the conversation, often it is peer-peer and near-peer mentoring within the communities that fosters group and individual development.

While attendance is not mandated at these sessions, the relaxed approach fosters a degree of autonomy for the group. Groups often meet off campus, and it has also worked virtually. Participants autonomously explore concepts focused on becoming the best future physician version of themselves.

Not surprisingly, the relevance to the group's shared experiences often leads to lengthy and interactive discussions each month. Additionally, these communities have provided a platform for learners and participating faculty to engage with concepts and practices which enhances learner faculty rapport.

Again, no one learning modality fits every learning situation but my experience with our Navigation Teams over the past two years suggests that learning communities touch on each of the 5 Rs noted by Schrager. I'm excited to see how we can capitalize on this process as we move forward with dedicated learning community spaces within the curriculum redesign process.

From Ms. Balson:

Speaking as a student involved in a Navigation Team at MCW-Central Wisconsin, I can attest these groups have created a growing, succeeding environment. A lesson you quickly learn when starting medical school is the essence of time, and how important it can be to manage it well. Dr. Jeff Fritz spoke on shaping the first-year experiences around relevant topics such as self-awareness and vulnerability. I can attest that when

millennials feel conversation is relevant, they are much more willing and likely to engage.

My Navigation Team has had the opportunity to have several raw and honest conversations from which I have seen personal growth. Becoming a doctor, or furthering your education in any way, not only requires you to build upon your textbook knowledge, but to challenge yourself to step out of a shaped box. Our Navigation Teams have dared me to broaden my perspective, accept change, and build wonderful relationships.

Forming bonds with peers and faculty has shown me to embrace the difference in everyone and remember we all learn in different ways. Once we, as a society, can embrace this idea, I would imagine we could help each other grow.

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