Online, student-led, peer-to-peer teaching of clinical skills

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University College Dublin’s (UCD) School of Veterinary Medicine is an AVMA-accredited Veterinary Educational Establishment with a diverse and international student population. UCD offers degrees in both Veterinary Medicine and Veterinary Nursing; the School’s Clinical Skills Centre is open to students on both programmes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, a VetPAL project was designed harnessing structured Peer-Assessment Learning (PAL). This created an interactive student-led learning community where students were trained by faculty to be tutors of other students (mentor-tutor-tutee learning system). Teaching of simulated veterinary procedures (eg, intravenous catheter placement, suturing) that was originally to be taught face-to-face, had to innovatively pivot to digital delivery in regular online sessions. Materials and models were mailed to students so they could practice in their home settings.

Challenges in teaching digitally were overcome by providing video content and “how-to” tutorials to ensure students achieved the best learning opportunity with the digital devices they had at their disposal (eg, 2 camera set-ups, different view and focusing possibilities, alternative model creation from domestic materials). Students set up 2 devices with cameras, 1 focused on the equipment and 1 focused on themselves, to ensure their skills could be viewed, assessed and constructive feedback given whilst continuing to interact socially. The COVID lockdowns meant that VetPAL also provided a valuable opportunity for enjoyable student-driven practice of basic clinical skills outside of the academic timetable, in an informal and low-pressure setting. Many students attested to it being a very helpful way to reach out to peers in isolating times.

Due to the success of the online VetPAL sessions, the same format was used for timetabled practical classes during lockdowns. Consequently, teaching continued to align with programme learning outcomes. Scheduled practical content delivered using this format included patient/surgeon preparation, suturing, medicine administration techniques, intravenous catheter placement, and bandaging.

The Clinical Skills Centre is a resource in high demand for core practical classes and ad hoc self-directed practice by students. The VetPAL initiative has further encouraged students to access the centre to develop their skills through regular self-directed practice. This additional practice has supported students’ preparation for OSCEs (objective structured clinical examinations) and supports preparation for clinical placement success.

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With the return to face-to-face teaching, VetPAL continues (online and in person) with a focus on interprofessional education where Veterinary Medicine and Veterinary Nursing students learn collaboratively. This supports current teaching and is a novel approach that could be transferable to long-term training cultures.

The Clinical Skills Centre is an important resource for practical classes and self-directed learning.

References