SHORT COMMUNICATION

Awarding global grades in OSCEs: Evaluation of a novel eLearning resource for OSCE examiners

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Abstract

Background: A novel online resource has been developed to aid OSCE examiner training comprising a series of videos of OSCE performances that allow inter-examiner comparison of global grade decisions.

Aims: To evaluate this training resource in terms of usefulness and ability to improve examiner confidence in awarding global grades in OSCEs.

Method: Data collected from the first 200 users included global grades awarded, willingness to change grades following peer comparison and confidence in awarding grades before and after training.

Results: Most (86.5%) agreed that the resource was useful in developing global grade scoring ability in OSCEs, with a significant improvement in confidence in awarding grades after using the training package ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusions: This is a useful and effective online training package. As an adjunct to traditional training it offers a practical solution to the problem of availability of examiners.

Background

Although variance in OSCEs should only be due to candidates’ ability, inconsistency among examiners is known to contribute to variance and can affect reliability (Boursicot et al. 2011). Hence training is vital to ensure that examiners are consistent in their assessment decisions. Most medical schools provide face-to-face training programmes for their examiners. However, with increasing scrutiny of examiner performance (General Medical Council 2009), and difficulties in releasing examiners from clinical service, there is a need for new approaches to delivering training. eLearning can be effective and learner-centric, allowing users to decide when and where to learn.

The borderline regression (BLR) method is a popular criterion-referenced method of standard setting in OSCEs. As the BLR is sensitive to outlying global grades (Pell et al. 2010) it is important to minimise outliers by providing examiners with appropriate training in awarding global grades. There has been limited research regarding OSCE examiner training and the impact this has on their performance (Boursicot et al. 2011). However, Pell et al. did find that OSCE examiner training made a significant difference to the marks they awarded candidates (Pell et al. 2008).

In January 2011, we launched an online OSCE examiner training resource (http://www.med.qub.ac.uk/Osce/), to provide supplementary examiner training. At least 12 medical schools in the United Kingdom now offer this package to their OSCE examiners. The multimedia resource covers the purpose of OSCEs and their typical format. The main focus of the training resource is to familiarise examiners with how to award global grades and the BLR method of standard setting (http://www.med.qub.ac.uk/osce/globalExercise.html). Users are presented with simulated OSCE station videos and are asked to award global grades on candidates’ performances. The videos were developed to demonstrate a range of candidate ability with three videos per student year group (i.e. years 2–5). Users score each video performance on a checklist, then award a global grade, aided by predefined descriptors. Users then compare their decisions anonymously with those of previous users. After completing at least three stations, users are asked to evaluate the resource. This paper reports on an initial evaluation of the OSCE training tool.

Method

Users reported their job description, years qualified and then responded to the initial statement: ‘I am confident in awarding global grades in OSCEs’ using a 5-point Likert scale (i.e. strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree).

Users then proceeded to practice awarding global grades. There are currently 12 simulated OSCE videos. After watching each of a minimum of three videos, users were asked to award...
a global grade and provide comments justifying why they awarded this particular grade. They were then able to graphically compare their grades and comments with fellow users and were subsequently asked whether they would change their global grade based on peer feedback (Response: Yes or no).

After completing the global scoring training exercise, users were asked to respond to four statements on the utility of the exercise and their confidence using the 5-point Likert scale. Users also provided additional reflective comments.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate responses from the first 200 users (February to October 2011). Paired samples t-test was used to compare confidence in awarding global grades before and after using the training exercise. Reflective free text comments were analysed by the investigators and relevant themes identified.

Results

Examiner experience ranged from <2 to >15 years. Users' backgrounds included medical, surgical and community based specialties. Overall, 200 users awarded 611 global grades. On 9.2% of (56/611) occasions, users indicated that they would change their grade awarded based on comparing their grades with that of their peers.

The majority of users (86.5%) either strongly agreed or agreed that the resource was useful in developing their ability to award global grades in OSCEs, 8% were undecided and 5.5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the resource was useful. There was significant improvement in confidence awarding grades after using the training package ($p < 0.001$). Most users strongly agreed or agreed that comparing their global grade (95.0%), and the reasons for awarding it (89.5%), with others was of use in developing their ability to award global grades in future OSCEs.

Among the users, 83.5% provided reflective free text comments regarding what they perceived they learnt from the training exercise and how this might change their practice in future OSCEs. Table 1 summarises the identified themes.

![Table 1. Thematic analysis of users’ free text comments.](image)

Discussion

Face-to-face OSCE training seminars incur significant overheads for the institution and loss of clinical time for examiners. The development of an online training resource, while unlikely to fully replace face-to-face training, is therefore a valuable addition. E-Learning provides users with greater flexibility and minimises impact on other professional commitments. Early evaluation of our online training package indicates that examiners find it useful and that it improves their confidence in awarding global grades.

Since assessment of one’s own ability is challenging and often inaccurate (Davis et al. 2006), peer feedback provides useful information for an individual to make an accurate assessment of their ability (Eva & Regehr 2005). Face-to-face OSCE examiner workshops often allow examiners to score on simulated or ‘live’ video recordings of a candidate’s performance in an OSCE station, followed by a discussion of the grades awarded. However, since such discussions usually take place within an open forum, examiners with outlying judgments may not want to share their grades or reasons for making such atypical decisions. A strength of our online training resource is that it provides users with the opportunity to compare their global grade decisions with those of their peers while preserving anonymity. We hope users feel encouraged to comment freely on candidates’ performance and compare themselves with fellow examiners. By assimilating the grades and comments of other users, the community of examiners should eventually reach a consensus on an acceptable ‘norm’, with outliers encouraged to reconsider their decisions in light of peer feedback.

Several issues arose from the free text comments. Firstly, medical students display varying levels of ability depending on the stage of their training and some examiners struggled to pitch their assessment to the correct level for the student. Secondly, the exercise brought home the potential impact of examiner fatigue in OSCEs, leading to aspects of a candidate’s performance being overlooked or missed. Users reflected that it was essential to maintain attention in order to provide a fair assessment.

This training package will be useful for all institutions currently using the BLR method of standard setting. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine if the training package makes an actual change in examiner behaviour and performance in OSCEs. Future research would help to determine the impact of such training on examiner performance and error variance in OSCEs. Nonetheless, this novel
cost effective online resource provides an interactive learning opportunity for examiners to compare their global grade decisions with that of a large cohort of fellow examiners, supplementing face-to-face training.

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