

## Boring presentation? These med students help sharpen dull talks

DEC 22, 2016

### Troy Parks

News Writer

---

The ability to give compelling and entertaining speeches and presentations is not often a skill that is taught in medical school. But students at the University of Michigan Medical School have changed that. Medical students with the Communication Collaborative have been “coaching” their fellow students through the development, practice and delivery of research presentations and speeches to steer them toward TED-style talks and away from reading their slides aloud in a monotone. And now, the Ann Arbor, Mich., school is working this concept into the curriculum.

“The idea behind this group is that people are capable of giving really compelling and motivating talks, speeches and presentations,” said Jacob Mack, a fourth-year medical student and coach with the Communication Collaborative. “We work with students who are giving presentations and coach them through the process.”

Founded in 2014, the collaborative began with grand rounds talks from medical students and has quickly evolved into a student-run speaker series and presentation consulting service.

“Often, faculty members will give a presentation [at grand rounds] because they have really interesting life events to talk about or things that everyone can learn from,” Mack said. “The students who founded the group a couple years ago thought that medical students also have a lot of great things to share.”

Grand-rounds presentations are given by a single student and run 40 – 50 minutes. Student speakers are nominated by their peers and then submit a proposal. The collaborative selects which students will be featured. The students selected are assigned two coaches who help them throughout the process. This year, the collaborative has held grand-rounds talks on artificial intelligence in medicine and the connection between historical medical mistreatment and enduring mistrust in minority patient populations.

“When we first meet, they’re already experts in the content of their presentation topic,” Mack said. “But we help them with developing the purpose and message of their work or experience and how they want to portray it to the audience in a way that resonates.”

Students are guided through the development of the narrative and blueprint for their presentation so that it adheres to what is expected of a formal presentation, Mack said, “but at the same time it’s a little more entertaining and compelling than what you might usually see.” The coaches help students build their slide decks to prevent slide reading and otherwise enhance their skills as orators.

After the initial coaching stage, students practice a few times with their coaches and the other students in the group before presenting at the grand-rounds conference in front of their peers and faculty members.

## Making a mark on the curriculum

The University of Michigan is gradually transforming its medical school curriculum and has decided to incorporate the collaborative as a course, in conjunction with the *Michigan Journal of Medicine*, as part of the broader academic communication curriculum, an idea conceived by Michael Englesbe, MD, a professor of transplant surgery at the university. The goal was to make the initiative a student-driven process, allowing for the development of leadership skills as well.

“This year, the Communication Collaborative was implemented as a pilot course by seven fourth-year medical students,” said Alisha Lussiez, also a fourth-year medical student and director of the Communication Collaborative. “It is an individually arranged elective and is meant as a longitudinal course, which affords us the flexibility to take the course at any time period in our schedule but as a year-long experience.”

## Coaching on demand

Now in the hands of fourth-year medical students, the collaborative has seen two additions just this year, which make it more robust for inclusion in the curriculum. The first is a website that allows students to ask for consultation on an outside presentation.

“There’s a place on our website where any student can put in what we call a consult request,” Lussiez said. “They fill out a form and let us know what they need help with, and that can range from developing an idea for a talk to design their slides to practicing their delivery.”

“Some people might be really proficient with their slides, but then they might have a little stage fright,” Lussiez said. “They just want to practice out loud and we help with that. We can help with any part of the process.”

Another component added recently is the research-based lunch talk, which involves a group of four students presenting research with each individual presentation running between six and eight minutes long. . The talks have covered subjects such as institutional United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) performance, predictors of smartphone screen time exposure, and even a talk about a girl who bound to a wheelchair and how appropriate treatment allowed her to walk again.

“Jacob and I were in charge of coaching one of the second-year medical students for her research presentation. She was so excited to have extra help in developing her presentation and for the opportunity to present her research,” Lussiez said. “Overall, it was a very rewarding experience for everyone involved.”

“This is something that [medical students] can bring to the next level,” Mack said. “When they’re interviewing for the next stage of training, their residency, that’s something they can talk about or write on their CV with their application. We’ve had really good feedback from students so far ... I think they’ve gotten a lot of value out of having a number of people focus on the actual delivery, in addition to the content, because this isn’t something that we learn as part of our curriculum.”

But the coaches see the value the Communication Collaborative holds for them as well. “Coaching our peers has been a really formative experience because everybody needs something a little bit different and you have to deal with the deadlines in making sure they’re prepared for their presentation,” Mack said. “We try to give them the resources and coaching that fit them individually.”

Having a solid takeaway for each talk and moving away from including too many technical details is especially critical, Lussiez said. “Everyone is busy, and if they’re taking the time to come to a talk, what can we leave them with? We started really pushing that in our coaching sessions ... That’s shifted to more impactful slides, less text and clearer data, and we’re focusing more on quality instead of quantity of information.”

## What’s next?

Lussiez said that the next step is to expand the resources on the website include tutorials capable of walking a student through the process of developing a presentation—from an initial brainstorming session through the final delivery.

“Ideally, the website would be a resource that could help anyone, anywhere create an engaging

presentation from start to finish,” she said. “People everywhere have great ideas, and we want to help them inspire others.”