Common Threads: Medical School and Community College Students Learning with Technology

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Education must be tailored to the anticipated (desired) outcome of the learner. This implies that, for different learners, with different desired outcomes, the educational process must, of necessity, be different. Or does it? Asking four core questions of a group of students studying math at a community college (CC) and students attending medical school (MS), two groups with ostensibly very different desired learning outcomes, answers revealed: 1) computer software was perceived to be of good to great value in assisting all students improve class learning, 2) the value of computers or laptops in the classroom depended on the class, whether in CC or MS, 3) students in CC and MS value 'greatly' the opportunity to learn "hands-on" and 4) the value of the class to the student was dependent on the subject matter, not the institution.

Recognising new pressures on both educators and their students, the Association of American Medical Colleges co-hosted, with the Shapiro Institute of Medical Education and Research at Harvard Medical School, two conferences in 2001 and 2002. Of note, although the educational process can and should be focused on the outcome of the learner, no student representative was included in either conference! The conclusion of the conferences, without input from the anticipated recipients of the education, was that the medical schools must implement as many as nineteen different themes of change, if they wished to improve the education of their students. In parallel, again in the US, a community college system in Virginia recently proposed allowing students to take only the math classes that they still needed to learn. This does away with the traditional approach that 'mandates' a full semester of study even if the student has already learned some of the material to be presented.

So, what are common threads and the differences between the educational needs of a medical school student and a student learning mathematics at a community college? Can one teaching system learn from the other? We will propose some answers but also some questions, to provoke discussion on how these two very different systems, putting the student in the center of the learning process, might improve educational outcomes for both groups of students.