

The Feedback FRENDS: An aid to a more formative WBA dialogue

The second part of a two-stage qualitative enquiry aimed at making workplace-based assessment a more intuitive and productive process.

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<http://h.theapp.mobi/feedbackfrend5>

The provision of surgical training has been a journey that has moved through a number of phases from the 'apprenticeship model' to the current competency model featuring workplace-based assessment (WBA). Although WBA is useful for validating the achievement of knowledge, skills and behaviour competencies, its primary benefit should be its ability to provide trainees with detailed guidance from their trainers. Evidence suggests, however, that the collaborative relationship between trainee and trainer necessary to achieve progress through WBA is undermined when feedback is delivered in a didactic or administrative way.¹

This article describes the second part of a two-stage qualitative enquiry that set out to explore ways in which the WBA process

could be enhanced to prompt richer verbal and written feedback. Part one, published in the May 2017 issue of the *Bulletin*, examined the nature of the written feedback trainees were receiving. It suggested that a significant majority of trainer feedback comments could be characterised as administrative in nature. Part two looks at how this problem could be addressed with the help of a small number of volunteer trainee-trainer pairs. It led to the development of a trainee-led communication aid, designed to promote and enrich formative training dialogues during WBA.

METHODS

The study design employed an action research methodology, a process typically used to improve a process or to gain understanding of a situation. Trainee

Table 1 Spread of participants

Participants		
Trainees	Trainers	Placement/ Specialty
Core	Associate specialist	Oncoplastic breast
	Consultant	Urology
	Consultant	Vascular
Specialty training	Consultant	Oral and maxillofacial
	Consultant	Vascular

participants responded to an open invitation through the Intercollegiate Surgical Curriculum Programme (ISCP) website, bringing with them their main supervisor as a participating partner. Trainee and trainer comments from interviews were combined with current educational theory and literature and gave rise to a number of ideas that were tested in a workshop. From this process emerged a new tool that was pre-piloted to examine how far the suggested improvements led to enhanced feedback practice.

Trainees and trainers were interviewed individually at their workplaces and the recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify common threads. Three themes emerged from the analysis:

1. The need to promote a better trainee–trainer relationship.
2. The importance of formative verbal dialogue during WBA.
3. The trainees' desire to have their performance viewed in context.

The thread running through the themes was the need for a more contextualised picture of the trainee's performance through better verbal communication, aiding the trainee–trainer relationship. The three themes are discussed below.

THEME 1: THE NEED TO PROMOTE A BETTER TRAINEE-TRAINER RELATIONSHIP

Trainees emphasised the importance of their relationship with their trainers, particularly their main supervisor, and felt that any

measure that could improve communication between them would be beneficial. For them, the quality of the training relationship was the single most important factor in obtaining feedback within clinical practice. This supported the notion that surgical training takes place in a social structure where learning is constructed collaboratively. There is evidence that the quality of the trainee–trainer relationship is a better predictor of successful training outcomes than supervisory skills or helpfulness.²

However, the trainee–trainer relationship does not exist in a vacuum and so any initiative to promote it for WBA purposes had to take account of the climate in which trainees and trainers were situated. The values and behaviours in the clinical environment exert a powerful influence over what could be practically achieved by improvements to WBA. Trainees felt that a degree of commitment to training relationships was essential if they were to be fruitful. Studies have shown that the dynamics of interpersonal relationships are subject to the forces of change and without active management naturally tend downwards.³ The sort of actions that trainees thought added value were trainer knowledge of the tools, knowledge of the trainee, good planning and an informal partnership approach to training. For trainers, it was key that the feedback process was efficient as well as effective.

Between trainer and trainee there is a necessary distance and trainees naturally held a degree of reverence for their seniors. This sometimes led to trainees feeling unable to question their supervisors and, through questioning, gain a more rounded insight

into their development needs. WBA needed to encourage a more reciprocal interaction, providing an opportunity for trainers to invite trainees to surmount the barriers between them.

THEME 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF FORMATIVE VERBAL DIALOGUE DURING WBA

The greatest impact on learning through WBA (in the trainees' view) was the quality of the verbal discussion, which they stressed needed to be held at the time of the assessment event. They felt that the main advantage for them was its ability to provide reassurance and resolve any misunderstandings while memories were fresh.

Trainees and trainers thought the WBA process of feedback discouraged natural dialogue in favour of a narrower discussion about competencies and, by doing so, lost sight of valuable evidence that was not easily visible. Trainers commented that their perception of improvements in trainee performance was often based on intangible behavioural changes such as increased confidence, fluency and flexibility. They found these signs difficult to verbalise and thought that WBA should provide a framework and language to define these 'gut feelings'.

WBA needed to act as a framework that prompted discussion about the nuances of practice so that the trainer could help the trainee understand the difference between competence and excellence. However, trainers sometimes felt that their comments did not connect with the trainee. WBA needed to involve the trainee's interpretation of the event so that trainee and trainer could align their frames of reference about what constituted good work, enabling a meeting of minds.

WBA also needed to discourage the traditional approach to giving feedback, in which information was conveyed as a one-way flow from trainer to trainee. The concept of feedback through dialogue corresponds with a consensus in educational theory that feedback should empower learners to take a more active role in their own learning.⁴ Trainees

felt that being encouraged to analyse their own performance would enable them to make their goals and strategies more meaningful. The trainer's input should be directed at helping the trainee to actively construct their understanding of their performance. The difference in this approach would mean that the trainer would need to suspend their judgement in order to ascertain what the trainee already knew about what they needed to learn.

Trainees felt that the manner in which the discussion about development needs was addressed could be a powerful motivating factor. Grade descriptors like 'development required', which were intended to indicate a learning trajectory, were seen as negative and needed to be replaced by a more positive way of talking about development needs where the focus was on aspiring to better one's own performance. Research in general practice suggests that it is better to confine the focus of improvement on a few small areas within a short timescale so as not to overburden the learner.⁵ Trainees sometimes found that there were significant obstacles to achieving actions and often felt the need for the trainer's practical help in creating opportunities to overcome them.

THEME 3: THE TRAINEE'S DESIRE TO HAVE THEIR PERFORMANCE VIEWED IN CONTEXT

Trainees and trainers felt that the holistic nature of what it meant to be a surgeon tended to be reduced when there was a focus on competencies. Trainees felt that WBA did not provide the opportunity to see them in the round because it focused on ticking competencies off and could adversely influence conceptions of their abilities. Comments suggested that there was a need to re-orientate views and widen the trainee-trainer discussion to bring about a more complete picture of performance.

In order to see the trainee more fully, WBA also needed to link past and present performance to purposefully demonstrate whether new learning had occurred and give the trainee a greater say in determining what learning could be showcased.

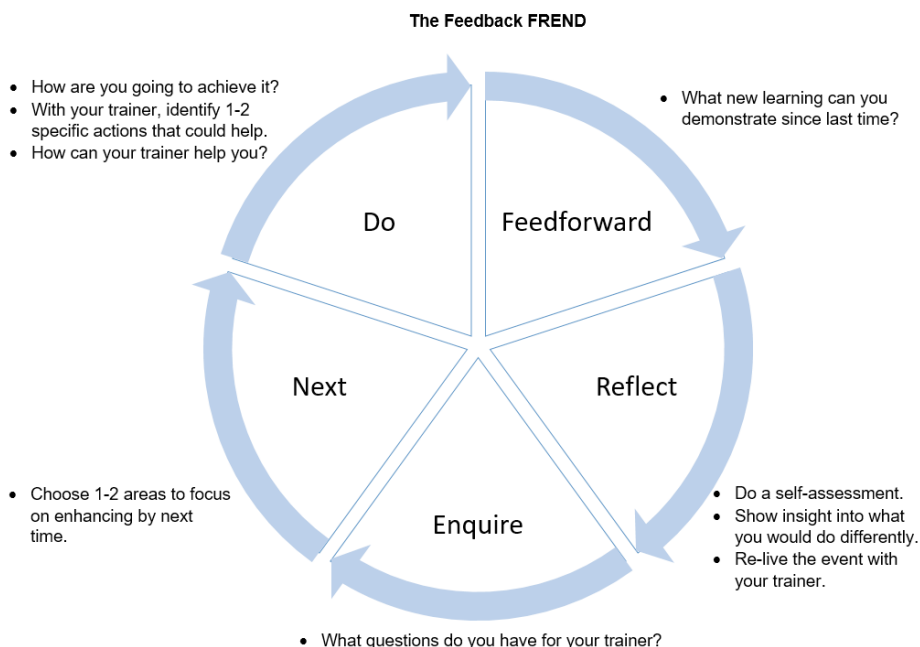


Figure 1 The Feedback FREND model

In summary, WBA needed to encourage different areas of discussion, incorporating the trainee's view throughout the learning process; it needed to be a trainee-led, structured and informal dialogue.

DEVELOPMENT OF A WBA AID – THE FEEDBACK FREND

There was consensus among the study group that a framework to promote formative dialogue between a trainee and trainer during WBA might help to reconstitute the strands of performance into a complete picture. The mnemonic FREND was designed to combine the needs expressed by trainees and trainers with the relevant educational literature on feedback to guide and enhance the way in which WBA feedback was conducted. Use of the FREND represented a different way of undertaking feedback, shifting away from the traditional didactic approach so that the discussion was not a one-way transmission from trainer to trainee but involved trainees in a more efficient and effective conversation. At the heart of these ideas was the suggestion that verbal feedback was the most important element and formed the basis for the written component.

THE FREND DOMAINS

Separately, each of the five headings of the FREND stimulates a component of a formative discussion so that, when combined, they help the discussion to meet the needs of trainees, trainers and the curriculum. The tool was designed to be used with any WBA and allow trainees to take a few minutes ahead of the feedback session to think about how they might set their performance in context and what they might want to say and ask.

Feed-forward (F): relates to the deliberate linking of past and present performance so that any aspect of the trainee's performance that had improved as a result of practice could be evidenced. Trainee and trainer agree the level of skill and responsibility to be demonstrated.

Reflect (R): provides an opportunity for the trainee and trainer to re-live the event in order to learn from it. The trainee should talk through their whole performance, setting their actions in context, including saying what they could have done differently, to demonstrate insight. The trainee's self-analysis should help to reveal their internal cognitive process and help the

trainer to better direct and relate feedback to the trainee's interpretation.

Enquire (E): provides an opportunity for the trainee to ask the trainer questions about any aspect of the task or experience. It provides an opportunity for the trainer to be more responsive and for the trainee to get specific help on the matters that concerned them.

Next (N): invites both trainee and trainer to identify the direction of future learning and performance. The focus is on ideas for incremental quality improvement tailored to the trainee.

Do (D): following on from the above, there should be specific actions that develop from the discussion, including what help might be needed from the trainer. It should focus on a small number of actions within a time-frame that will make it possible to review performance again, possibly through another FREND cycle.

RESULTS OF THE PRE-PILOT

Interviews following the four-week trial of the FREND covered what worked and did not work. Comments suggested that the FREND had fostered more complete conversations, more tailored guidance and supportive discussions around mistakes. At the start participants followed the guidance carefully but with practice found that it became a more natural process so that the guidance was not needed.

Trainees felt more able to ask questions of their trainers so that they could get specific help on matters that concerned them. For trainers, giving technical advice was straightforward but comments suggested that trainees more commonly asked about managing interpersonal and

political issues and that trainers found these more difficult to address, as well as giving advice to trainees for practice beyond the current placement.

There was an indication that the ability of the FREND to make a positive contribution to the trainee–trainer relationship rested upon the need for each party to make a commitment. The tool was likely to be sufficiently flexible to fit into a busy working environment and provide a structure for conversation that the participants found easy even when tired or stressed. However, without a commitment it was likely to be unable to stimulate desirable behaviours. A tool such as the FREND, designed to prompt discussion for learning, might have a positive effect on an existing good relationship but make a poor relationship more obvious with a consequent negative effect, opposite to its intended purpose.

The trial showed that the notion of giving the trainee a more active role could also be adopted in improving written feedback and that there might be a benefit to both trainees and trainers if trainees provided the written summary. It would reduce the trainer's workload and help them to check the trainee's understanding, engagement and progression while helping the trainee internalise and remember what was said in their own words.

Three key messages emerged from comments:

1. Trainees should take a more active role by writing the summary of the verbal feedback.
2. Trainers might benefit from guidance about how to help trainees manage interpersonal and political issues.
3. Trainers should be prepared to guide trainees' learning beyond the current placement.

CONCLUSION

Trainees and trainers undertaking frequent workplace assessment concurrent with patient care face pressure to conduct WBA administratively by having a narrow discussion about trainee progress. The aim of the second part of this two-stage qualitative enquiry was to make WBA a more intuitive and productive process. The FREND is an evidence-based practical support for trainers and trainees aimed at enriching the verbal discussion and giving a focus to the written component.

Results from the small-scale trial indicated that the FREND prompted a better dialogue among trainee–trainer pairs and a further trial will provide more information about its value and development. We are planning to make the FREND available as an optional resource within the ISCP so that it can be evaluated on a voluntary basis.

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