



[Sartania, N.](#) (2023) A response to the letter to the Editor by Jian Wen Chong and Joseph C. Lee. *Medical Science Educator*, 33(1), pp. 305-306. (doi: [10.1007/s40670-022-01725-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-022-01725-4))

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A Response to the Letter to the Editor by Jian Wen Chong and Joseph C. Lee

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Dear Editor,

I was pleased to read Chong and Lee's interest in our paper on the collaborative CBL (cCBL) method used at the University of Glasgow Medical School [1] and draw parallels with their practice. In response to their Letter to the Editor [2] I would like to address two points: a) on cCBL facilitators' role and, b) on the group activity in a session.

While we agree that students' active involvement in a self-regulated session will only benefit their deductive skills, we think they might be ill-equipped to deal with complex cases at an early stage in their clinical training on their own. In our setting, we expect the students to have core knowledge of normal anatomy and the physiology of the body systems relevant to a given CBL, complemented with further clinico-pathological insights gained from a limited number of lectures on the topic, which they attend prior to the session; however, they will not have had sufficient time to integrate all information deeply and be able to apply it to the case effectively just yet. Rather, it is one of the objectives of the cCBL to stimulate that deep, integrative learning. The students draw to some degree on tutor's expertise and appreciate the extra insight that specialist tutors bring to the session, particularly their anecdotal experiences with similar clinical cases. We regularly get feedback in favour of expert tutors over the generalist ones and are asked to increase the number of subject-expert tutors where possible. As such, we now try to ensure that at least one of the two weekly cCBL sessions is delivered by an expert in the topic being taught.

The other point I wanted to address is on student engagement. I agree with the correspondents that while most students enjoy cCBLs, we need to be mindful of those few that don't: 8% of the study participants responded negatively to the survey statement "The breakout sessions were useful in discussing topics with my peers", with a further 17% responding 'neutral'. We aim to explore this further, qualitatively, as collaborative approach and the use of 'post-it' notes was designed to encourage active participation from all. We want to explore whether different confounders such as student demographics or academic abilities for example, are at play here. In fact, Krupat et al., [3] has previously reported that collaborative CBL may particularly benefit students with lower academic performance.

The group size is indeed of primary importance in collaborative work. The small group size of three or four was chosen by us to prevent the quieter students' 'hiding' and diffusing responsibilities, as is common when in larger groups; we have frequently observed this in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) groups of 8 – 10 participants. However, groups smaller than this may be disadvantageous as reported by Edelbring et al., [4], who raised the concern that knowledge asymmetry in very small peer groups may negatively impact on the learning experience.

I commend the correspondents on elaborating on these issues, stimulating the evolution of our approaches to teaching and learning, which is the key to ensure the students are equipped with skills needed for a progressive workforce. It is important because with an ever-increasing knowledgebase, it is evident that equipping students to become lifelong independent learners is more important than a specific content knowledge. Concept-based learning and teaching alongside the development of transferrable skills will be essential to future-proof our graduates and cCBL will be able to help with it. It improves students reasoning skills and the ability to evaluate evidence critically; it focusses class time on deductive analysis and fosters students' confidence to express own ideas.

Author's Contribution:

NS is the only author and has designed, written and revised this letter.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate – N/A

Consent for Publication – N/A

Conflict of interest – The author declares no conflict of interest

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