

Thinking outside the box for postgraduate research methods instruction in Africa: MicroResearch and thesis proposals

Background

Although African leaders agreed to strengthen national health research agendas a decade ago, the number of publications by African health professionals remains limited. MicroResearch is a multi-disciplinary team approach to train novice researchers for projects that provide local solutions to health problems. The early success of the program in East Africa led to an iterative adaptation of the approach to prepare postgraduate health professions students for thesis proposals and encourage life-long research activity.

Methods

The 2017 cycle utilized the two-week MicroResearch workshop to review principles of research methods and develop individual thesis proposals under a faculty coach. The 2018 cycle invited only postgraduate health professional students, added inter-professional learning, supplemental material on mixed methods research and an assessment on study designs. The 2019 cycle will include an additional module on conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The process will be evaluated over four years by: 1. end of course evaluations, 2. success rates of thesis proposal defense, 3. success of thesis defense and 4. post-graduation survey on continued research activity.

Results

In total, 18 postgraduate students in Family Medicine and Nutrition have completed the MicroResearch workshop to develop thesis proposals. In the 2017 cycle, 6 Family Medicine residents were among the 14 who completed the course and 5 passed their thesis proposal defense, with major and minor corrections. One Family Medicine resident dropped from the academic program. The postgraduate only cohort in 2018 included 7 from Family Medicine and 5 from Nutrition and Dietetics, with 100% of participants rating the workshop as excellent.

Conclusion

Early results suggest that the MicroResearch process using experiential learning and feedback from coaches can be successfully adapted to develop thesis proposals for postgraduate health professions students. Long-term evaluation processes are needed to determine impact on success in final thesis defense and continued research engagement after graduation.

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