Archives of Surgical Research | Invited Commentary

Utilities of Teaching EPAs: Expanding the Scope of EPAs Beyond Clinical Context

Muhammad Zafar Iqbal[1], Mohamed M. Al-Eraky[2]

IMPORTANCE Recently, entrustable professional activities (EPAs) have been reported for teachers. Since it is a novel approach, the spectrum of their utilities has so far remained unexamined. Supported by the literature, this manuscript aims to propose some potential utilities of teaching EPAs. Teaching EPA frameworks can be used to design structured faculty development programs for specific teaching roles. EPA-based faculty development programs can then provide practice opportunities to the teachers to transfer the training to their teaching practices. Teaching EPAs can also be used to assess whether teachers are ready to independently perform the desired teaching tasks. Teaching EPA frameworks can serve as a learning guide for personal and professional development of the teachers. Finally, teaching EPAs can be used to credential the teachers and define their scope of teaching practice. Although EPAs hold multiple utilities for the teachers, program developers, and administrative bodies, their practical operationalization remains limited to date which could be attributed to their novelty.

KEYWORDS entrustable professional activities; teaching competence; teaching EPAs

Author Affiliations: Author affiliations are listed at the end of this article.

Corresponding Author:
Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
drzafariqbal@live.com
+14389787550

Many competency frameworks exist in theory to support the professionalization of teachers, yet they do not address how these competencies can be acquired and systematically assessed[1]. This is where the concept of entrustable professional activities (EPAs) finds its applicability as EPAs are known to translate the theoretical competencies into practice. EPAs are observable tasks of a professional domain that can be entrusted to a trainee once he/she demonstrates the necessary competence to perform this task unsupervised[2]. Originally proposed for competency-based postgraduate training, the concept of entrustment is now expanding to the teaching context where EPAs can be used to entrust the teachers to perform teaching tasks unsupervised[3]. Consequently, the scholarship on contextual EPAs for different teaching domains is gaining momentum. Since this is a novel development, the utilities of teaching EPAs have not been fully explored and discussed so far, which we aim to highlight in this manuscript.

Structuring Faculty Development: Faculty development programs are a vital source to support the teachers in the development of their teaching skillset. However, the effectiveness of these training programs in improving teaching practices remains debatable, primarily because of the lack of structure in training[4]. Similar to other clinical training programs, EPAs can be used to design structured faculty development programs. For instance, the comprehensive EPA frameworks available for specific teaching domains (i.e., bedside teaching, small group facilitation et cetera) can be used to design structured and focused faculty development programs for these specific teaching tasks[5,6].

Instigating Transfer of Training to Workplace: Teaching EPAs also have the potential to promote the transfer of training (faculty development) to workplace (teaching) setting[3]. In a traditional EPA-based training program, an informal practice at workplace is an essential component before entrustment evaluation. The informal practice period after formal faculty development can provide sufficient opportunity to the trainee teachers to apply the newly acquired skills to their teaching practices, thus instigating the training transfer to workplace.

Assessing Readiness to Teach: A long-standing issue in faculty development is to assess if teachers are ready to perform their teaching roles and responsibilities. This issue could be resolved through teaching EPAs and their associated entrustment process. EPAs are known to be useful in assessing the readiness of trainees before they are allowed to practice independently[7]. Understandably, health professionals pursuing a career in academia are by default licensed to teach in many educational institutes. However, we argue that without evidence, it cannot simply be assumed that teachers are ready and able to perform their teaching tasks effectively. EPAs provide means to assess teaching proficiency and generate evidence of whether or

not teachers can be entrusted to independently perform the teaching tasks. Upon demonstrating sufficient proficiency in the designated teaching task (i.e., bedside teaching, small group facilitation), the teachers can be entrusted, and a certificate of entrustment can be awarded.

Guiding Personal and Professional Development: Another utility of teaching EPAs is to serve as a personal learning and development guide for the teachers. As recommended by ten Cate and Taylor, a well-designed EPA should provide a detailed task description, its specifications and limitations, the relevant competencies and experiences required to perform the designated task, and information sources to assess task progress[7]. Comprehensive EPA frameworks, outlining the pre-clinical and clinical teaching tasks, can serve as a learning guide for personal and professional development of the teachers. The EPAs frameworks may help the teachers in identifying areas of strengths and deficiencies in their teaching practices and may also help them build their academic portfolios[8].

Credentialing and Privileging Teachers: Credentialing the clinicians is a norm in clinical context where clinicians are awarded practice privileges after demonstrating competence in a particular clinical domain. Credentialing is a valuable approach that defines the scope of practice of the clinicians by delineating the procedural boundaries for them within which they are allowed to perform. Similar to clinical practice, the credentialing concept can be used to define the scope of practice of teachers[9]. After each successful entrustment to perform a particular teaching task (for example, small group facilitation), the teacher can be credentialed as an entrusted small group facilitator. Moreover, incorporating an EPA-based credentialing system in institutional promotion regulations might help the

leadership in regulating academic promotions of the faculty[10]. Including such a model in promotion criteria might also help the faculty to internalize the value of being an entrusted teacher.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Designing EPAs for teachers is a novel approach to streamline teacher education, training and evaluation. These EPAs hold multiple utilities for the teachers, program developers and administrative bodies. EPAs can be used for structuring faculty development, entrusting teachers, guiding promotions, ensuring transfer of training, and credentialing the teachers. They can also be used by the teachers as a guide for their personal development and for building their teaching portfolios. Despite multiple theoretical utilities of teaching EPAs, limited practical examples of their application are available in the literature. As a result, certain questions remain unanswered and are potential gaps for future researchers. These intuitive questions include: would the idea of being an entrusted teacher be acceptable to the teachers, especially in those contexts where teacher certification is not mandatory? What should be the eligibility criteria for someone to supervise and entrust other teachers? Considering senior teachers' existing workload and time constraints, would it possible to include other stakeholders in the entrustment decision-making process? These questions are essential to answer to fully operationalize teaching EPAs for teacher education, training and evaluation. Finally, through this paper, we encourage program developers and researchers to use the existing teaching EPA frameworks within their institutions so that valuable and practical lessons can be learned.

Author Affiliations. Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada; Dr Mohamed M. Al-Eraky Assistant Professor and Head of Medical Education Department, Zagazig University, Zagazig, Egypt.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest

REFERENCES

1. Iqbal MZ, Al-Eraky MM. Common myths about entrustable professional activities. *Educ Med J* 2021;13(2):97–100. doi:10.21315/EIMJ2021.13.2.9

2. ten Cate O, Chen HC, Hoff RG, Peters H, Bok H, van der Schaaf M. Curriculum development for the workplace using Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs): AMEE Guide No. 99. *Med Teach* 2015;37(11):983–1002. doi:10.3109/0142159X.2015.1060308

3. Iqbal MZ, M. Al-Eraky M. Using entrustable professional activities (EPAs) to assess teaching competence and transfer of training: A personal view. *Med Teach* 2019;41(1):107–8. doi:10.1080/0142159X.2018.1440074

4. Steinert Y, Mann K, Anderson B, Barnett BM, Centeno A, Naismith L, et al. A systematic review of faculty development initiatives designed to enhance teaching effectiveness: A 10-year update: BEME Guide No. 40. *Med Teach* 2016;38(8):769–86. doi:10.1080/0142159X.2016.1181851

5. van Dam M, Ramani S, ten Cate O. An EPA for better bedside teaching. *Clin Teach* 2021;18(4):398–403. doi:10.1111/tct.13346

6. Iqbal MZ, Könings KD, Al-Eraky MM, van Merriënboer JJG. Entrustable professional activities for small-group facilitation: A validation study using modified Delphi technique. *Teach Learn Med* 2021;In press:1–10. doi:10.1080/10401334.2021.1877714

7. Ten Cate O, Taylor DR. The recommended description of an entrustable professional activity: AMEE Guide No. 140. *Med Teach* 2020;0(in press):1–9. doi:10.1080/0142159X.2020.1838465

8. Antao V, Cavett T, Walsh A, Bethune C, Cameron S, Clavet D, et al. Leading from where you teach: Educational leader role within the Fundamental Teaching Activities Framework. *Can Fam Physician* 2017;63(10):808–12.

9. Valenza JA, George LA, O'Neill PN. A model for clinical credentialing of dental school faculty. *J Dent Educ* 2005;69(8):870–8.

10. Iqbal MZ, Könings KD, Al-Eraky M, AlSheikh MH, van Merrienboer JJG. Development of an entrustable professional activities (EPAs) framework for small group facilitators through a participatory design approach. *Med Educ Online* 2020;25(1):1694309. doi:10.1080/10872981.2019.1694309