

# What's in a Word? Understanding "Interprofessional Collaboration" from the Students' Perspective

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## **Abstract:**

This short research report examines the definition of "interprofessional collaboration" (IPC) held by students from medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, and physical therapy at a Canadian university. Four consistent themes emerged across all student groups: 1) Different professions working together; 2) As a team; 3) Toward a common goal; 4) Using the skills/expertise of other professions. This study also revealed differences among students from the various professions, including hierarchy, respect, and client-centeredness. The authors conclude that interprofessional educational initiatives need to provide opportunities for students to engage with students from other professions about what these differences are and why they occur, to ensure that future collaborations in the healthcare workplace are effective.

*Keywords:* Interprofessional collaboration; Healthcare students; Interprofessional education

## **Background**

A shared understanding of interprofessional collaboration (IPC) across healthcare professionals is critical for effective collaboration to occur. Some contrasting notions of collaboration have been discussed from the perspectives of practicing healthcare professionals [1], yet little is known about how healthcare students understand interprofessional collaboration. This short research report examines the definitions of IPC held by students from medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, and physical therapy at a Canadian university. Understanding students' various perspectives of IPC may be the key to developing effective interprofessional education (IPE) initiatives that address the gaps between these perspectives and thereby facilitate more effective collaboration in the future.

## **Methods**

Our research was conducted as part of the Queen's University Interprofessional Patient-Centred Education Direction (QUIPPED) project, an interprofessional education initiative, and received ethical approval by the institutional Human Research Ethics Board. All pre-licensure students registered in September 2006 in medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, and physical therapy were invited to complete a Web-based questionnaire. Students enrolled the following year were invited to complete the same questionnaire in September 2007. The letter of invitation and questionnaire were distributed through the Faculty of Health Sciences e-mail system, a reminder was sent two weeks later, and the questionnaire was removed from the website after an additional two weeks. The questionnaire included several questions

regarding attitudes about IPE and experience participating in IPE courses, which have been described in QUIPPED's second annual report [2]. This short report analyzes only the responses to one open-ended question: "How do you define Interprofessional Collaboration?"

The data files were transferred into the qualitative computer software ATLAS.ti (2005), and the data were first analyzed across the entire data set and then separately by profession. The data analysis was guided by conventional content analysis theory [3] and was completed independently by two researchers. During analysis of the first year of data, the researchers found a close match between main themes. They discussed some of the less common themes and a consensus was established on how to categorize or name the theme. The common themes from the first-year data were then used as a basis for analysis of the second set of data. Given the repetition of themes among many of the professions, including profession-specific themes, in the second year of data collection, we are confident that a saturation point was reached in the data collection phase for these four professions.

## Results

From the total number of respondents across the two years (219 in 2006 and 82 in 2007), 197 students (n=143 in 2006, n=54 in 2007) from medicine (n=93), nursing (n=45), occupational therapy (n=28), and physical therapy (n=31) provided an answer to the question "How do you define interprofessional collaboration?" The questionnaire response rate was approximately 22% in 2006 and 9% in 2007 of the entire student population of the four programs. Due to small numbers in 2007, all responses are described as one cohort.

There were four broad themes in the students' definitions of interprofessional collaboration, with two having more specific subthemes. These were as follows:

- Different professions working together
- As a team
- Toward a common goal
  - For optimal/improved patient/client care
- Using the skills/expertise of other professions
  - Understanding the other professions' roles

The frequencies of the themes reported across the four professions are summarized in Table 1.

The most frequently cited theme among students in nursing and occupational therapy was the description of IPC as "different professionals working together." For medical and physical therapy students, the most common theme was working "toward a common goal," with many students citing "optimal patient care" as a specific goal.

There were differences in vocabulary across professions for one key concept—"patient/client." Medical and nursing students always referred to "patients," while occupational therapy students primarily used the term "clients." There were also several terms that were used interchangeably by students in all professions. These include "inter"/"multi"/"trans" as well as "profession" and "discipline," as in interpro-

Table 1

**Frequency (and percentage) of themes by profession (n=197)**

Themes	Medicine (n=93)	Nursing (n=45)	PT (n=31)	OT (n=28)
Different professions working together	59 (63%)	34 (76%)	26 (84%)	21 (75%)
As a team	13 (14%)	13 (29%)	≤ 5	≤ 5
Toward a common goal	65 (70%)	27 (60%)	27 (87%)	20 (71%)
For optimal/improved patient/client care	33 (35%)	14 (31%)	17 (55%)	16 (57%)
Using the skills/ expertise of professions	33 (35%)	18 (40%)	8 (26%)	11 (39%)
Understanding the other professions' roles	≤ 5	7 (16%)	≤ 5	≤ 5

fessional, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary. One student in particular used “multidisciplinary” and then justified her reasoning for using the term:

I DO NOT like the term INTER and would use MULTI instead. INTER acts as if there are barriers between professions and may represent just two PROFESSIONS, and MULTI implied more a team work of MANY professionals. (emphasis in original)

In addition to the common themes above, there were also profession-specific themes that are described under each profession, below.

**Medicine**

As described above, students in medicine (n=93) most often focused their IPC definition on working together toward a common goal, such as in the following example: “working in a beneficial fashion with other professionals for a common goal.”

However, a distinctive theme identified by the medical students focused on recognizing the presence of a role hierarchy. One student described that “there may exist within the team a hierarchy, but each member plays a recognized role, and their work is respected and integral to completion of the goal.” Another medical student described IPC as follows: “it means that work needs to be delegated to people with certain areas of expertise.”

Another distinctive theme was that of “problem-solving,” seen only among the medical students. One example of this theme is “each profession using their knowledge base and skills to optimize problem-solving and patient care.”

Medical students and physiotherapy students together were unique in that they both raised the issue of communication. One medical student emphasized that IPC “requires good communication, interpersonal skills, and conflict resolution skills.

The end goal is always optimal care of patients." A physiotherapy student stated that IPC "means working together not just physically, but also in communication."

### **Nursing**

The definition of interprofessional collaboration provided by the majority of nursing students (n=45) emphasized a "team" collaborating to achieve the goal of improved patient well-being. More frequently than any other student group, nursing students described "respect" for individual professional contributions as a necessary element of interprofessional collaboration. One nursing respondent described IPC as "working as a team with respect and value for each team member's unique role and contribution." Another stated that IPC is "team work between all professions, respecting and helping each other, communication with everyone, no hierarchy but everyone recognizes the scope of practice of each profession." Students of medicine joined those in nursing as another profession that often discussed respect, as seen in this definition of IPC: "Working in predefined groups of professionals that have built up a relationship and mutual respect."

### **Physical therapy**

The definition of IPC reported by the physical therapy students (n=31) focused on improved patient care through understanding one another's contributions and increasing communication among professions, as described in one representative definition.

Cooperating between multiple professions provides optimal patient care. It involves an understanding of the roles of other professionals and of one's own profession within the healthcare system. It involves communicating with other professions, learning from them, respecting their input, and providing feedback to improve relationships.

A theme unique to the physical therapy students was virtual collaboration, described as the ability of professionals to collaborate without being in the same place or working at the same time. One student defined IPC as "when individuals from different healthcare professions work together (not necessarily at the same time) to provide quality patient care."

### **Occupational therapy**

Occupational therapy students (n=28) were similar to physical therapy students in their focus on improved patient care through understanding individual contributions among professions. One student wrote: "Interprofessional collaboration is the interlinking of professions in their place of work to create the most efficient and effective level of care for the clients being served."

Among definitions of IPC, a unique theme held by occupational therapy students was the focus on client-centered care. One example of this concept is described as follows: "health professionals who work together on a team to provide client centred, holistic care to clients on a case by case basis."

## Discussion

This study revealed important differences among students from various health sciences professions. Four consistent themes emerged, as well as unique profession-specific differences, to the degree that we believe that a saturation point was reached in the data collection phase.

Specifically, this exploratory study revealed that the majority of participants have a common understanding of the key elements of interprofessional collaboration, in that it involves different professionals working together toward the common goal of better patient care with unique contributions from each profession. This is a critical starting point in ensuring that students from different professions have a shared understanding of what interprofessional collaboration is when participating in IPE opportunities in the classroom or in the clinical environment.

The differences in understanding the concept of interprofessional collaboration are quite interesting. We hypothesize that some of the differences are related to a student's training and education, such as the use of the word "client" by occupational therapy students. Other differences may be a result of pre-existing notions and stereotypes regarding how one profession thinks another profession's attitudes are toward them [4,5]. These notions include the concept of "respect" that was often seen among nursing and medical students, or how one profession sees their own roles among other professions, such as the concept of "hierarchy" among medical students. The common themes that emerged among all professions are interesting and important, and it is precisely these differences and the possible students' attitudes that can be used as a focus for interprofessional education.

One Canadian study examined the student perspective of participating in an interprofessional initiative and discussing the benefits and challenges of IPE [6]. Overall, the students recognized the importance for interprofessional collaboration of all the key themes found in our study, many of which were goals of the IPE initiative. These themes also included many of the less cited themes, such as communication, respect, and problem-solving. D'Amour et al. [7] conducted a literature review on the core concepts related to interprofessional collaboration that identified the following concepts: sharing, partnership, interdependency, power, and process. Although our themes are different, these overall concepts are in large part shared by the student perspective. Power is the only concept that was not discussed by the students.

Components of collaboration have also been articulated by other professions, including midwifery [8]. However, as far as we know, this is the first analysis of students' understanding of the concept.

Finally, the differences our study found in students' use of "inter" versus "multi" and "profession" versus "discipline" highlight a need to better define these terms to students during their IPE initiatives. These terms have been very well defined in the literature [9], leading to the widespread use of "inter" and "professional" by many students, but not systematically.

## Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. First, there was a low response rate, par-

ticularly in the second year of the survey. This is likely a result of using an online questionnaire format, since there was no incentive to complete the questionnaire. The poor response rate signifies that results cannot be generalized to the broader student body. Another limitation is that there may be some students who completed the survey in 2006 who responded again in 2007, since the invitation to complete the survey went to all registered healthcare students. This limitation was a result of our inability to identify students who responded in both years. However, we hypothesize that few students who answered the survey in the first year also answered it in the second year, which may also explain the poor response rate in the second year.

A further limitation is that there is some overlap in the themes that were highlighted by the two researchers, particularly the themes "different professions working together" and "as a team." Although we consider the concept of "team" as separate from simply "working together," we understand that many students may not necessarily have considered the concepts as we do. It remains interesting, however, that some student groups did not seem to use the term "team" as others did. Finally, the overrepresentation of responses by students from medicine and nursing (which is proportionate to class sizes) may have led to more unique themes being drawn from those two professions. Although we consider that saturation was reached in data collection, it may have been reached for the common themes, but may not have been reached for the more unique themes. This is an exploratory study, so we suggest further research be undertaken to look more closely at these unique differences in students' understanding of interprofessional collaboration.

### **Application of results**

Interprofessional educational initiatives need to account for differences in understanding of what interprofessional collaboration is and how it can be achieved. In particular, these initiatives should provide opportunities for students to engage in discussions with students from other professions about what these differences are and why they occur.

Faculty from across the health sciences also need to be aware of both the common understandings and the differences, before they can address them during interprofessional education initiatives. For instance, the QUIPPED initiative used the findings reported here during an interprofessional faculty development workshop. One learning activity was developed during the workshop whereby faculty were asked to review some student definitions of IPC, with the specific professions hidden, and were asked to determine the common and unique themes of each group of definitions. The faculty were surprised to learn how students from various healthcare professions defined IPC similarly and differently. They determined some ways to ensure that some of those gaps in understanding would be addressed during IPE sessions. Overall, it was agreed that healthcare professionals need to be aware that students have already formed an understanding of the term "interprofessional collaboration" prior to even being exposed to a clinical collaborative environment.

This exploratory study revealed some interesting shared and unique understandings of interprofessional collaboration by students of medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. Building a shared understanding of interprofessional collaboration in the academic environment is an important step toward ensuring future successful collaborations in the healthcare workplace.

### Competing interests

There are no financial, personal, or professional interests that could be construed to have influenced our paper.

### Abbreviations

IPC:	Interprofessional Collaboration
IPE:	Interprofessional Education
OT:	Occupational Therapy
PT:	Physical Therapy
QUIPPED:	Queen's University Interprofessional Patient-Centred Education Direction

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