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A Simple Teaching Module for Brain Sections: Integration of Traditional Teaching Methods and Modern Computer Technology.

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ABSTRACT

With the reduction of teaching time for gross anatomy, and modification of course content, it has become important to keep the teaching concept-based yet interesting. This need led us to develop some simple and effective supplemental teaching aids that involved integration of traditional teaching methods and computers. Here we present a module for teaching brain sections. The traditional method was supplemented by photographs of the brain sections that were labeled using CorelDraw application. The digital images were sent to the students via e-mail. This allowed students to review study material as per individual convenience. Students reported significant enhancement in the independence and proficiency of learning neuro-anatomy. However, the importance of dissection and study of actual specimens cannot be over-emphasized. Use of modern technology is only a supplement to traditional teaching-learning methods.

KEYWORDS: Teaching module, brain sections, digital images, integrated teaching methods.

Introduction

In the academic year of 1998, the Maharashtra University of Health Sciences introduced a new curriculum for undergraduate medical students, wherein the duration of pre-clinical course was reduced from three semesters to two semesters. The course content for Anatomy was modified, laying greater stress on cross-sectional anatomy and clinically-oriented learning. Though the number of teaching hours were reduced, it was important to maintain the academic integrity of the course and to keep the teaching of Anatomy conducive to student participation, interest and learning. Thus, it became imperative to develop innovative teaching methods to help the first year medical students to understand the basic concepts and apply the knowledge of Anatomy to simple clinical cases. In order to meet this need, we developed and introduced several simple supplemental teaching aids (2).

Under the MUHS prescribed curriculum, of the two semesters for first year undergraduate medical course, 650 hours are allotted to Anatomy. One-third of this time is devoted to didactic lectures, and the remaining is meant for practical laboratory/ dissection work. Leaving out time for Histology, Embryology, Radiological Anatomy and Living Anatomy, there is further reduction in the number of hours actually available for dissection, without any significant reduction in course material (1). It was therefore important to find new instructional/ learning tools that would lessen the burden on the young minds of our students, and would make learning and remembering/memorizing Anatomy simple and concept-based (4). Also, since students tend to be gadget-crazy at this age, it was thought that tools that would allow them to use their laptops or mobile phones for study would be popular.

Keeping these issues in mind, we developed a number of learning modules. Here we present a module developed for simplifying the study of brain sections, a topic students find difficult to understand and remember.

Materials and Methods

Serial coronal sections of an intact, formalin-fixed, adequately hardened cerebrum were taken according to Cunningham's Manual of Practical Anatomy, 15th edition. The following sections were used:

1) Coronal section through body of lateral ventricle,
2) Coronal section through posterior horn of lateral ventricle, and
3) Horizontal section through left cerebral hemisphere.

The sections were placed horizontally in stainless steel trays and bathed in formalin. Photographs were taken on a Canon 350D digital camera. The photographs were uploaded on to a personal computer and using CorelDraw application, important features of each photograph were labeled. To bring objectivity to the learning process, the principles of 'specific learning objectives' was applied by using a colour scheme. Thus the 'must know' structures were labeled in red colour. The CorelDraw images were converted to JPEG images. All First year medical students have registered e-mail IDs, to which these images were sent. Print-outs of the same on good quality photographic paper were displayed on the notice board as well.

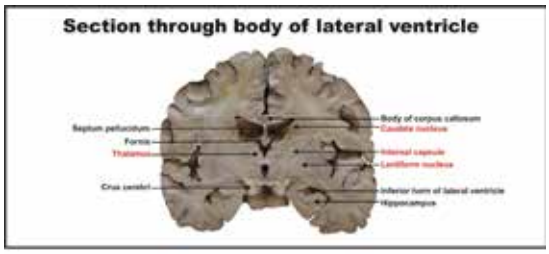
Results

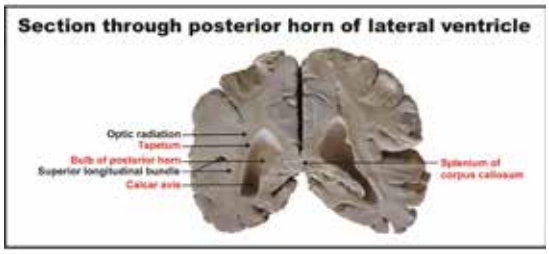
The main goal of this study was to develop an innovative teaching-learning method that would be user-friendly and accessible to students at any time, as per individual convenience.

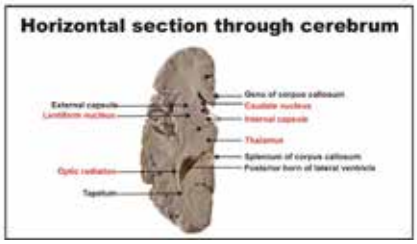
Towards this goal, the digital images were neatly labeled. Only the necessary/important structures were highlighted, leaving out unnecessary/irrelevant details. The 'must-know' structures were labeled using red color.

The images were sent to First year medical students on their registered e-mail IDs. The students downloaded the images either from the central digital library, or from their own mobile handsets.

Students reported that such images were a very handy and useful tool for them to review course material.







Discussion

Computers can be a very convenient and effective format to display/communicate anatomical images. A wide variety of course material can be uploaded by the faculty and transferred to the students in this manner. In the US and Canadian medical schools, computers have been in use for teaching gross anatomy for more than 12 years (3). In India, with the increasing availability of computers and internet facility in medical colleges, and that of laptops and/or mobile phones among the student community, this can be a very convenient method of dissemination of information.

With the introduction of one-year course for Anatomy, it has become important that the students are given highly specific and relevant complimentary educational aids. This will help improve the level of comprehension by the students without compromising on content. However, the importance of dissection and study of actual specimens cannot be over-emphasized. Use of modern technology is only a supplement to traditional teaching-learning methods. A combination of use of computers with cadaveric dissection experience is a natural progression of technology. What is reported here is only one of the various creative teaching modules being developed by us for the various disciplines of Anatomy.

Conclusion

Use of modern technology enhances learning. However, it should not be used to eradicate traditional teaching methods, but as a supplemental learning aid.

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