Author's response to reviews

Title: Introducing a reward system in assessment in Histology: A comment on the learning strategies it might engender.

Authors:

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PDF covering letter
Revision of manuscript: McLean
Referee’s detailed comments, according to numbered list

1. Page 2. Abstract
   Addressed

   Explained.

3. Page 3
   Explained.

4. Page 6. Results
   Categories revised to some extent in Tables 3 & 4. It was not my intention to interpret to any great extent. I would have preferred to take them at face value.

5. Connection between assessment practice and student approaches to learning.
   The referee is indeed correct. The learning approaches were not measured. These are difficult to do, and were not the intention of the study initially. It was only when student comments were received, did it become apparent that there might be benefits (e.g. more consistent effort, more confidence, etc.). Our original intention of introducing it was to de-emphasize the year-end exams, when students sit for about 9 in two weeks, and reward students for continuous effort. The paper goes into great detail about explaining the assessment (integrated, practical, functional, etc.) o convince the reader (and ourselves) that rote learning and memorisation would not allow a student to obtain 70% average. Convinced that we are assessing for understanding, which requires deep learning approaches, and using student comments such as “prevents cramming” and “makes you want to do your best” (which would promote deeper approaches), I think I am justified in tentatively concluding that we might be engendering the appropriate learning strategies. Nowhere in the manuscript have I been judgemental about this (as I am aware that we have not measured learning approaches). Rather I have chosen to use words like “perhaps”, “may”, “might”. I believe that from the indirect evidence I have, I am able to make such a tentative judgement. I have stated that assessing learning approaches would be the next step.

   I have found almost no literature on the positive effects of rewarding consistent and excellent achievement on student learning and attitudes to learning. I believe this manuscript therefore to be fairly novel. It also carries an important message, which one of the referee’s might fail to acknowledge. We, as educators, through evaluating the impact of our assessment on students, can use assessment to the benefit of students. From years of experience of teaching and assessment, little attention is paid to using assessment as such. Although trapped within a traditional curriculum that is overloaded with volume and assessment (most of which is probably inappropriate!), we have been able to offer students a system which benefits them, which I believe they carry over to their other courses (because of our course objectives of integrating with other disciplines). This manuscript provides a message which I hope some other educators might consider (rewarding student achievement). I would also like to see more teachers/lecturers analysing their assessment and making some kind of judgement on its appropriateness. In this way, assessment will become a more positive influence on student learning.

   Thus, while the referee is correct that it might not be possible to answer the question and provide absolute statistics, there is circumstantial evidence that allows some degree of judgement. I have also discussed the possibility of strategic learning and agreed that some students might use this strategy (which is definitely better than a surface approach!), and provide some argument in favour of students being intrinsically motivated. What more can I do?
I have added a bit more in this regard, but I thought that I had covered how we assess for understanding comprehensively in the Methods section.

7. Nothing to do here
8. ‘o’ vs. ‘o’?
9. Page 9
Deleted reference to Vygotsky.

**Author’s final comments**
I am happy with the content and the discussion of the manuscript. I have changed the title to be more “tentative”. I have tried to shed some light on (not answered directly) student learning approaches by considering student comments and by being confident that our assessment tests understanding and not memorisation. I believe that this allows me to make some (but not a definitive) judgement on this issue of learning approaches, and admit that this study allows for follow-up work on student approaches. Not having canvassed students with regard to their learning approaches (which is indeed a difficult task), does not allow me to make a definitive judgement, hence the “might”, “may” and “perhaps”. Some additional evidence is provided by a reference of mine introducing the 1997 students’ conceptions of learning: Even in the students who achieved less than 50%, staff could identify statements that referred to “understanding”, according to Marton and co-workers’ (1993) conceptions of learning.

I spend a considerable amount on time on preparing manuscripts, this one being no exception. I believe that it is worthy of publication, considering the favourable comments from Ass and Eval in Higher Edu (well-written, etc.) but which they thought would be more appropriate in a medical/health sciences education journal. Your journal is not recognised by our subsidy system, and so I will receive no financial incentive for publishing. The incentive for submitting to you was the promised quick response, which has indeed been the case.

While one referee obviously has no problem with the article, I trust that the second referee will reconsider some of his/her reservations in the light of my comments and some of the additions to the text.