Reviewer's report

**Title:** Communication and Proximity Affects Attributable to Sense of Presence in Distance Bioinformatics Education

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 9 September 2010

**Reviewer:** Andrew J Holland

**Reviewer's report:**

Review

Communication and proximity affects on outcomes attributable to sense of presence in distance bioinformatics education
Locatis C et al

General comments: The manuscript was generally well written and provides some new data on an increasingly important topic, with many medical schools having to conduct much of their student’s education remotely. The text was overlong, however, and would benefit from shortening to both focus the authors’ message and maintain the reader’s interest. Whilst perhaps not critical to the main message, the content of the teaching was only alluded to indirectly in the title of the manuscript.

Abstract: Major - The authors did not really present a cogent ‘background’ to the study, but rather a summary of what they did. The differences between the methods chose (videoconference versus webcast) were not defined. In the methods the seniority of the students was not disclosed, nor the topic or topics taught.

Background: Major - This was poorly structured and excessively long at 3.5 pages. The purpose of the study was presented in the first paragraph and only later was the reason for the study presented. I did not understand the phrase in the first paragraph of page 5, “Transactional distance is posited…”. Minor - The use of the term “endemic” in the first sentence of the second paragraph implies adverse qualitative assessment to face-to-face teaching: was this the intent of the authors? Discretionary - An important reference on the value of videoconferencing in medical education was not cited (Holland AJA et al, Aust N Z J Surg 2008; 78: 297-301). The authors comment on “camera shyness” in the first paragraph, but equally some lecturers may be similarly introverted during a face-to-face tutorial or lecture.

Methods: Major - The authors provide insufficient detail on the seniority of the students and no information is provided at all on when students from groups 1 and 2 were enrolled. The different distance-learning educational modalities used should be briefly defined and the student groups clearly identified under subheadings. The techniques used in the statistical analysis were not mentioned.
Results: Minor - I am unfamiliar with the “Cronbach” test (see above) and the editor may wish to consider referral to a statistical reviewer.

Discussion and conclusions: Major - This section was again lengthy at 3.5 pages. The authors identify some of the limitations of the study. Further comment is difficult without the additional data mentioned above, but perhaps the main message would be to repeat the study with more diverse and larger groups of students over a similar time frame using mature technology?

References: See comment in background.

Tables: These were satisfactory

Thank you for asking me to review this manuscript.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interest.