Reviewer's report

Title: A Randomized Trial Comparing Digital and Live Lecture Formats

Version: Date: 28 August 2004

Reviewer: James L Wofford

Reviewer's report:

General

This experience is worthwhile reading for clinician-educators, but the manuscript needs revision to be more useful to the readers.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

ABSTRACT/INTRODUCTION
In the background section of the abstract, the stated goal of the study is too vague. It should be reworded with more specific outcomes related to knowledge and attitudes. Focusing on a difference in variances is not appropriate for an abstract and distracting to the central purpose of the study. Background - the last sentence of the first paragraph of the background section “although didactic…” does not make sense. You thought the value of video was important enough to comment on in the introduction, but you did not ask the students questions about it (too late now), nor do you discuss it in the discussion section (not too late). Please address this.

METHODS
State in the methods section how many students are in the class and what proportion of the class actually were randomized? In fact, the first whole paragraph of the discussion should be in the methods section instead. Please state clearly in the methods section what the questions were to which they were seeking agreement on advantages and disadvantages of CD-ROM lecture from the students. How did the students view the CD-ROMs? What kind of computers? Does the school issue standard laptops?

DISCUSSION
The comparison of the NBME versus the “examination” may confuse readers because some readers are not going to know what the NBME is or when it is administered in your clerkship timeline. The fact the students agreed that the live lectures could be replaced with the digital format could suggest that neither format had value for the student. Characterizing the students view as very positive is too strong, given the acknowledged problems with the study. It is valuable to have the Michigan State web site for others to view. Some discussion of the lag between video and audio is warranted. In my view, it is not proper to advertise proprietary software in a research article, nor is it necessary. In fact, the last paragraph of the discussion should be removed as it is a discussion of different data, and a different experience. The data from your study should stand on its own. Again in the conclusion, you bring up a new subject altogether, that of web-based testing. The
Conclusion should focus on the data initially presented, not start new ideas.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

RESULTS
There is much statistical jargon in this manuscript in the methods section and on Table 1 that is not reader friendly. Do you really need degrees of freedom on the main table? Have a clinician-educator edit this section to improved readability?
Table 2 - Just not like being in the room with the presented “ must be a typographic error that must be corrected. Very confusing to the reader.
Need the headers (strongly agree, agree,…. On the table 2

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

none

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
None