Reviewer's report

Title: Restrictions Impeding Web-based Courses: a survey of publisher's variation in authorising access to high quality on-line literature

Version: 2 Date: 11 November 2003

Reviewer: Margaret Holmes-Rovner

Reviewer’s report:

General: In general this is a well-written and helpful articles.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Questions for clarification:
1. How is this different from the same problems we have always had getting articles copied for student course packs? Is it the issue of whether the University library subscriptions should cover the restricted access website? I could not quite sort this out from the paragraph at the bottom of page 8. Can you clarify the difference a little more? How is the copyright law different with regard to web based teaching? Is it cost? Is it the type of access? Is it access at all?
2. Would it make a difference to publishers if the secure website did not allow students to print copies? Was this addressed in your inquiry?
3. On page 7 your discuss “extracts”. Is this different from the author’s abstract, which tends to be available through Pub Med and other sources?
4. On page 9 at the bottom, you note that copyright is held by the authors in PLoS and BMC. Does this suggest that instructors really have to get permission from the authors? I think not, but in this context, it would help the reader to understand what “open access” means for teaching purposes.

Suggestions: I would add to the conclusions
1. That publishers might at least publish their policy with regard to use of journal articles for teaching purposes on their web pages. In the long run, a uniform policy of the type suggested would be helpful. In the short run, it would have saved you time to at least know what the policy was.
2. I wonder if a list of the 35 publishers you surveyed, and their responses to your inquiries might be listed as an appendix to this article. As there is no need for a space limitation in an electronic journals, you can share your experience in detail. This might 1) create momentum for those publishers to clarify or change their policies and 2) save other instructors time in investigating the same issue. Shining a light on practice is a vital function of public communication.

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

None

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

None

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

None