Author's response to reviews

Title: Facilitators' Influence on Student PBL Classroom Online Information Resource Use: A Survey

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PDF covering letter
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Dr. Christopher Gadd
Assistant Editor, BMC Journals

RE: MS: 6420133182886336, Facilitators’ Influence on Student PBL Classroom Online Information Resource Use: A Survey

Dear Dr. Gadd:

Thank you very much for your email of March 9, 2004, informing me of completion of peer-review of the above-referenced manuscript. I am very pleased at the thoroughness of the reviews and appreciate this opportunity to revise and resubmit the manuscript.

My responses to the reviewers’ comments are as follows:

A. Reviewer Michelle McLean

**Major compulsory revision 1** (Note: Major compulsory, minor essential and discretionary revisions were enumerated sequentially).

“The use of the word “behaviour” in its current context. For me, “behaviour” encompasses much more than the superficial meaning the authors have ascribed to it. Facilitator “behaviour” might be replaced with “attitude” and for the students, the word should be replaced with “use” or “usage”. The Oxford dictionary defines behaviour as “the way in which one conducts oneself; manners; the treatment of others; moral conduct”, which is my understanding of the word. In fact, the first paragraph under “Background” discusses facilitators influencing behaviour in the sense that I understand. In the same vein, the first sentence under “Background” is very broad. If “behaviour” is considered in its more acceptable context, then the conclusion of the abstract is misleading.”

**Writer’s response**

We have revised the references to behavior to refer explicitly to “verbal behavior.” We believe this respects the dictionary definition cited by the reviewer. Verbal behavior is one of the many ways facilitators conduct themselves, and allows us to refine the term to focus on the relevant subset of ways facilitators conduct themselves, examining their verbal behavior as opposed to their behavior using the whiteboard, for example.
We do not believe substituting the word “attitude” for verbal behavior would be adequate to convey the meaning of the dependent variable of the study.

We have also revised the conclusion in the abstract to be more precise as to facilitators’ verbal behavior encouraging and discouraging student use of online information sources.

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**Major Compulsory Revision 2**

“The use of the word “classroom” is perhaps contrary to the philosophy of PBL. The small group session is just that, a session or a tutorial. The authors indicate that facilitators spend 6h per week with students. Perhaps a description of what is undertaken during these 6 hours might give the reader some insight into why the facilitator might need to encourage students to use the Internet or other online resources. At our institution, during the first 2h session, the facilitator is activating prior knowledge, brainstorming and encouraging students to prioritise their learning goals. In the 2nd 2hr tutorial, at the end of the week, the students, after self-directed learning, report on these learning goals. It would appear that the “facilitator” at Michigan is not only a process expert, but is also a tutor. Is this correct?”

**Writer’s Response**

Details of the PBL class have been added to the third paragraph of the Background section.

At Michigan State University, we encourage our facilitators to focus on process, and to avoid “mini lecturing” as content experts, and is noted in the revised text. This is due to the assignment of precepting duties, which does not allow for content experts to be assigned to domains, the discussion of which would benefit from their content expertise.

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**Minor Essential Revision 3**

“Table 3 summarises Table 1 and 2 and so they can be omitted. The data in Table 3 should be represented as %, not as frequencies. The stats should also be included in the table.”

**Writer’s Response**

We have deleted Tables 1 and 2 and made the suggested revisions (inclusion of percentages, inclusion of statistics) to Table 3, now labeled Table 1.
Minor Essential Revision 4

“Table 4. The caption does not reflect the content as well as it should. I found myself going back to the text to see how the Mean was determined (scale of 1-10).”

Writer’s Response

The caption of Table 4 (Table 2 in the revised text) has been revised to reflect the table’s content clearer: a comparison of mean student ratings of their perceptions of facilitator verbal behavior, and student use of online information resources (two groups). 


Minor Essential Revision 5

“Table 5 (in a different format – frequencies are reported as (n = xx)) should in fact be the first table. Is there not some conflict in Table 5 with the essence of the study? Table 5 tells us that only 1 student (out of 68 students) reported active discouragement. Then, 98.5% of students perceived either that the facilitator did not actively encourage or did encourage use of online resources. On the scale of 1-10, with 1 being actively encouraging and 10 being actively discouraging, the 4.92 reported in Table 5 (Writer’s Note: This should be a reference to Table 4) is therefore a very neutral stance (i.e. did not encourage nor discourage). The sentence “The results indicate that students..... rated their facilitators’ behaviour more towards the ‘discouraging’ end ...” is in fact then not really true. >5 would be towards discouraging.”

Writer’s Response

We respectfully disagree with the reviewer’s opinion that Table 5 should be the first table. We prefer the reviewer’s suggestion that we replace Tables 1 and 2 with Table 3. The essence of the study is the difference in students’ perceptions of preceptors’ verbal behavior as more or less encouraging the use of online information resources, and the apparent association of those perceptions with more or less use of online information resources - the point of Tables 1 and 2 (as ennumerated in the revised manuscript). While it is true that only 1 student reported “active discouragement” by a facilitator of using online information resources, this does not diminish the fact that, as a whole, there was variation among students in their perception of their facilitators’ verbal behavior with respect to encouragement of use of online information resources, and that this difference of perception appears to be related to reported use of such resources. This result is reflected in Tables 1 and 2.

We may have over-interpreted the data by reporting:
“The results indicate that students in groups who didn’t use online information resources during PBL class rated their facilitators’ behavior more toward the “discouraging” end of the perception scale, while students who did use the information resources rated their facilitators behavior more toward the “encouraging” end of the perception scale.”

We have revised the text to state:

“The results indicate that students in groups who didn’t use online information resources during PBL class rated their facilitators’ behavior more toward the midpoint or “neutral” end of the perception scale, while students who did use the information resources rated their facilitators behavior more toward the “encouraging” end of the perception scale.” (Italics in this appearance only.)

We have deleted Table 5, as we feel it obfuscates the point of the manuscript: facilitators who are rated more to the “encouraging” end of the scale have students who more often report using online information resources than do facilitators who are rated more toward the middle of the scale.

Discretionary Revision 6

“What would have been useful to the reader would be the inclusion of the categories of “encouragement”, e.g. searching for an image; looking up a word, listen to (e.g. heart) sounds, etc.”

Writer’s Response

As such categories were not included in the survey, it is not possible to include them in the manuscript.

Discretionary Revision 7

“The statistics are not complicated, but I had difficulty in the manner in which they were reflected. I checked with our statistician, who suggested that since the authors did not assume equal variances, they should have used a non-parametric test (e.g. Mann Whitney). The outcome might have been the same, but it would be more appropriate. The data were combined, not “collapsed”, according to the authors.”

Writer’s Response

We used a Mann-Whitney U test and presented the results in the new Table 2.
The word “collapsed” has been replaced with the word “combined.”

Discretionary Revision 8

“The facilitators were also asked about their perceptions of their encouragement. What happened to these data? How does these relate to student perceptions?”

Writer’s Response

We used a Mann-Whitney U test to compare facilitator self-ratings and student ratings of facilitators on the 10-point encouragement/discouragement scale, and have presented these results as Table 3.

Other comments/suggested revisions:

Results

Reviewer comment 1: “Paragraph 1 needs to be reworded – very cumbersome.”

Writer’s Response

Paragraph 1 has been revised to make it more readable.

Reviewer comment 2: “Reference to tables should be as follows: “...one to three times per class (Table 1),” and then delete the sentence after this which describes the Table.”

Writer’s Response

The text has been revised in line with the reviewer’s comments.

Reviewer comment 3: “Paragraph after “Insert Table 1”. Should this not read “...resource at least 1->6 times?” as the rows were combined?”

Reviewer comment 4: “The same holds for the paragraph after “Insert Table 2 here”. 1-6 times?”

Writer’s Response
The text has been revised accordingly.

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Discussion

Reviewer comment: “Last paragraph: “Our study was very narrowly...student and facilitator perceptions...” Where are the facilitator perceptions?”

Writer’s Response

The facilitator perceptions are presented in the text as part of the new Table 3.

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Reviewer comment: “Preceptor – this is the first time this word is used in the manuscript. Please explain in context or replace.”

Writer’s Response

The word “preceptor” has been replaced with the word “facilitator.”

B. Reviewer George Nowacek

Minor Essential Revision 1

Reviewer comment: (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Writer’s Response

The text has been reviewed and edited.

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Minor Essential Revision 2

Reviewer comment: I would suggest including the actual survey questions as an appendix. I found it difficult to understand the results without knowing the wording of the questions and the response scales. I eventually pieced together what I think was the questions, but I shouldn’t need to do that.

Writer’s Response
Rather than include the survey forms as appendices, the authors have endeavored to revise the working of the results section to clarify the description of the response scales. If this is inadequate, we can provide the survey forms as appendices.

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Minor Essential Revision 3

Reviewer comment: *There were several minor grammar and typographical errors that need to be corrected with a final reading.*

Writer’s Response

The authors have given the manuscript a final proofing, and hope that all problems with the text have been addresses.