Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 3 February 2004

Reviewer: Michelle McLean

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript can be shortened considerably. It is not an in-depth study, but has been drawn out in an effort to make this a full research paper, which I believe it is not. In view of the fact that it involves only 68 students, it is more like a pilot or case study.

Considerable revision and summary is necessary if it is to be published. It is an interesting study, which would be better understood with details of the PBL "class" referred to by the authors. It would have also been helpful to compare the students' evaluation of the facilitators with the self-evaluation of the facilitators. The results are of interest, as they highlight the important role of the facilitator in influencing student activities, in this case, relating to online resource use (evaluated narrowly, during the tutorial). If these resources are critical to the learning within and beyond the tutorial, then it is important to identify those facilitators who might not be encouraging student learning optimally.

I have reservations regarding manner in which some of the material is presented or reported.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. 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.
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?

Minor Essential Revisions

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.
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).
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 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.

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

Other comments/suggested revisions
Results
1. Paragraph 1 needs to be reworded – very cumbersome.
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.
3. Paragraph after “Insert Table 1”. Should this not read “…resource at least 1->6 times?” as the rows were combined?
4. The same holds for the paragraph after “Insert Table 2 here”. 1-6 times?

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

Preceptor – this is the first time this word is used in the manuscript. Please explain in context or replace.

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

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

None.