Reviewer’s report

Title: Tutoring in problem-based learning curricula: the influence of tutor background and style on effectiveness

Version: 1 Date: 2 January 2005

Reviewer: Patricia Margaret Anne Lyon

Reviewer’s report:

General

Overall evaluation
The paper feeds into the debate in the published literature over the role of content expertise in PBL tutors and goes on to explore the relationship between students’ perceptions of tutor effectiveness and tutors’ clinical qualifications and academic appointment.

The methods are described well. The discussion and conclusions are well balanced and significant in the wider context of medical education. One point the authors make seems particularly relevant – this is where they raise the question of what exactly is meant by the term ‘expertise’ and go on to suggest that it may be ‘... the way a tutor uses his/her expertise, rather than the degree of expertise, which is important …’. They also suggest that tutor characteristics other than those measured by the instrument may influence the students’ perceptions of overall effectiveness. A follow-up study, using qualitative methods, for example, observation and interviews, may well shed further light on these factors.

Overall this paper is well written, relevant and likely to be of interest to the practice of the general readership of BMC Medical Education.

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

None

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

In early parts of the paper the authors use terms to refer to the six scales:
p. 6 ‘three sub-categories of behaviour’ in each category
p. 7 ‘outcome variables’, ‘use of expertise, cognitive congruence, test orientation’ etc.
but it is only on page 8 that we are told that these constitute six scales. I would have found it more helpful had the authors described the instrument as having six scales back on page 6.
On page 10 the authors use ‘characteristics’ when they mean ‘scales’ - ‘Clinicians tended to have higher scores on all characteristics than …… but these were only significant for Use of Expertise and Role Congruence’. (Same applies to paragraph 2 on page 10.)
On page 11, first line, and again in paragraph 3, the authors use ‘behaviours’ when strictly speaking, (given that they are using factor analysis) they mean ‘scales’.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

An example of one or two items (the highest loading items) from each of the scales would have been useful for readers unfamiliar with the instrument used in this study.

**What next?**: Accept after minor essential 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**:

I declare that I have no competing interests.