Reviewer's report

Title: The Influence of Objectives, Learning Experiences and Examination Blueprint on Medical Students’ Examination Preparation

Version: 1 Date: 11 May 2005

Reviewer: Marcel D'Eon

Reviewer's report:

General

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

There seems to be some confusion in my mind over the relationship between the intended curriculum and the informal curriculum. Certainly the definition is stated in the paper, and the hidden curriculum is included for clarification by contrast. However, I question the identification of the informal curriculum with hints given during lectures and small group sessions. If the large and small group sessions were true to the objectives of the course and they did not veer off the intended curriculum then objectives and the hints in class were both the intended curriculum and we do not have a source of the informal curriculum. The authors themselves seem to give evidence that this is in fact the case, that the large and small group sessions did not veer away from the objectives and therefore were not examples of or sources of the informal curriculum, undermining their stated objectives for this study. This point requires some response and clarification.

Once they discovered, to their surprise, that objectives were not used much by the students, the authors attempted to find an explanation. First, if the finding was unexpected they must have expected something and I was surprised that this was not expressed as a hypothesis at the beginning of the article. The objectives read like a qualitative discovery oriented study but the analysis was largely quantitative and hypothetico-deductive. I think that one or more hypotheses should have been given to express what the authors expected to find and why. Second, in trying to explain why students did not turn to the objectives for guidance, and why those who did were likely to be the ones who ended up in the lower half of the class by marks on the examination, they did not actually ask the students. Their explanations were speculative and although they did look closely at the available evidence they did not convene a focus group or conduct interviews. Perhaps, and here I too speculate, the students who used the objectives were the ones who did not attend class much and were not privy to hints given at those sessions. Whether this is true or not is immaterial; the point is that we do not know unless we ask them and probe a little to discover what they were thinking at the time. I was left feeling quite unsatisfied with the explanations given not that they are implausible but that the students themselves were not asked.

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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)

As I read the paper I realized that I did not know what the examination blueprint looked like for that course. Was it based on the objectives, the topics, the difficulty of the questions or other criteria or combinations of them all? This paper would be greatly enhanced by providing an example of a section of or the whole examination blueprint.
The final paragraph of the conclusion does not seem consistent with the rest of the paper. The study showed that students do not use objectives to guide their study and those who do seem to do less well as those who use other guidance. The point of the exhortation in the final paragraph is for educators to continue using objectives to guide their course design. The results of the study do not bear on the use of objectives for course design and assessment. It seems that the two functions of instructional objectives (to guide course design and assessment and to communicate expectations to students) were not clearly differentiated in this paper. If this last paragraph is to be kept then some clarification and elaboration is needed.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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:

I declare that I have no competing interests.