Reviewer's report

Title: The Fourth Wall as didactical device in medical communication training

Version: 1 Date: 13 July 2006

Reviewer: Keith Sawyer

Reviewer's report:

General

The pedagogical technique described in the article has great potential and I applaud the authors for experimenting with these improvisational, role play techniques. I think that a paper reporting on this technique would be of value to the medical education community. However, there are two significant problems with this manuscript.

The first is that the audience is unclear. The discussions of the methodology (transcript only? transcript plus video?) and of the different "fourth walls" would be of interest to a professional interaction analyst, but probably not to a medical educator. However, the interaction analyst would then want to see a lot more concrete detail from the transcripts, and concrete detail about the nonverbal actions that were visible on the video.

The second is that there isn't enough detail to show the potential of the methodology. The reader needs to see an extended account of one or two particular role plays, with information about how the patient actress was coached, what her interactional strategies were, and specifically how the situation was designed to accomplish a pedagogical objective. For example, what are the issues that are supposed to arise? At what points does the moderator stop the drama, and why? Perhaps more than one extended example would be desirable. There should be a significant amount of actual transcribed dialogue, from both the role playing participants, as well as the moderator and the students, along with analytic comments about what the student comments demonstrate about their evolving understanding, and what the moderator's comments are designed to evoke in the students.

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

I assume the target audience is the medical educator, and if so the discussion of the different "fourth walls" are not going to be of so much interest. Instead, add in the pedagogical details about how the dramas and roles were designed to accomplish specific educational objectives, and provide some transcripts of interactions that included the students. Use those student comments as evidence that the students are learning from the scenario. One or two learning scenarios should be described in detail, along with student dialogues; then, a longer list of specific learning scenarios that this methodology has been used with should be provided, perhaps just as bullets with one sentence each. The conclusion section should then have some discussion about what sorts of learning goals this method is most appropriate for, given the experiences of the authors, and with reference to the transcripts of student participation in the scenarios.

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

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 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.