Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluation of a learner-designed course for teaching health research skills in Ghana

Version: 1 Date: 17 November 2006

Reviewer: Kevin Eva

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General
This paper provides a well-written summary of an impressive educational effort. My initial reaction was that the study was too specific (i.e., lacking in generalizability) to warrant publication, the study primarily being a descriptive one outlining the findings from a single course in a specific institution. However, upon further reflection, I think the study provides a sufficiently good example of how to do such program evaluation well (given the mixed methods and variety of outcomes measures) as to be publishable in BMC Medical Education. I would further emphasize this value of the paper and encourage some further revisions to address the issues raised below.

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

1. Further detail regarding who provided the assessments of the student projects would be useful. The authors note “internal and external,” but I can’t tell whether external means someone separate from the study/course development team or someone at arm’s length. If the former, the authors should be concerned about conflict of interest in that such individuals may be prone to assigning higher marks than they would otherwise.

2. The results could be argued to simply be indicative of the fact that students always know more about any subject matter after encountering the subject matter than they do before they encounter it. That’s hardly a compelling argument for the success of the course as a textbook could potentially accomplish the same goal. Can the authors make any evidence-based claims regarding the added value of the more elaborate course they have developed relative to the simple provision of research methods textbooks?

3. Despite the authors’ positive view of the results, the findings could also be perceived negatively. Participants passed the course, but I have to assume the course developers don’t deem the learners to now be qualified as independent researchers capable of carrying out a systematic program of research in the same manner as those with more intensive and long-term research training. The participants themselves, however, reported post-course that they were “very able” to conduct research. These findings are reminiscent of Darwin’s claim that “ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge.” Some qualification of just what level the authors consider these participants to have achieved would be appropriate, especially in light of the confidence participants appear to have developed.

4. Another way to spin those results is that they provide further indication of poor self-assessment (i.e., the participants have no way of knowing how difficult it is to do good research given their minimal training/experience). The self-assessment literature would further call into question the validity of the self-report measures and this limitation should be noted. For the same reason, many of the claims should be tempered (e.g., “identified elements that were critical in making the course successful” (p.5) should actually be re-phrased as “identified elements that were perceived to be critical in making the course successful”).

5. Despite my willingness to recommend publication in BMC Medical Education, I am not convinced by the authors’ arguments on page 5 regarding why this study should be considered research rather than evaluation. Part of their claim is that they have advanced theory. The “critical elements” identified as leading to the success of the course were identified solely based on the intuitions of the participants rather than through more careful empirical testing. Those intuitions are equally susceptible to being erroneous as the more quantitative ratings of ability and, as a result, provide no more than interesting hypotheses. Therefore, I think the paper would be better positioned if it presented itself as an example of how to do program evaluation well rather than trying to make tenuous claims to having conclusively advanced knowledge regarding the important ingredients in developing such courses. It is a good paper, but needn’t strive to be more than it is.
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 of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests: I declare that I have no competing interests.