Reviewer's report

Title: A randomized evaluation of the quality of scientific writing using Web-based versus traditional workshops

Version: 1 Date: 28 August 2008

Reviewer: Jorge G Ruiz

Reviewer's report:

Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
Yes

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
Here is where I have several concerns.

1. Subjects: The authors do not describe the subjects of the study in detail. What was their level of training? Medical students depending on the country can spend 4-8 years. I can say the same of the other students. This seems like a very heterogeneous group of students and the block randomization may not solve the problem. How did they determine “previous experience with research writing”? I am curious about what the relevance of marital status is.

2. Pilot: If the authors used the information from the pilot to calculate their sample size, we need more detail about how the authors conducted the pilot.

3. Implementation: I am very confused here. It is unclear to me what the control and intervention groups got. For starters, the text in the body of the article do not match figure 1. In both cases (control and intervention), the authors fail to describe the actual pedagogical intervention and settle by naming a series of independent and unconnected technology approaches which they do not coherently integrate. The authors do not clearly articulate the specific competencies and learning outcomes for the intervention.

a. The word workshop in the “traditional workshop” group sounds anything but like a workshop. What do they mean by traditional? The authors describe several different strategies (IM, telephone) and actions that seem to be different for each pair of students. How often did the students meet with their mentor? What was the content of the discussions? When was the mentor available? Was there a curriculum? Was this just practice with feedback?

b. Web-based group: Some of the same issues as in point a. was the web-based intervention “Google docs”? The authors talk about VoIP (technology) but it is unclear how they used it. The authors discuss the purpose of using templates but do not describe them. The authors need to describe in ore detail the synchronous and asynchronous technologies.

4. Assessment strategies: The authors’ description of the qualitative methodology seems incomplete. How many students participated in the focus groups? How long did they last? Who conducted the focus groups? Was the constant
comparative method used to extract the themes? How many researchers extracted the themes? Did they reach consensus? The sentence “group discussions were transcribed using Conventional Qualitative Analysis Techniques” is incorrect and insufficient. Did they mean “analyzed” instead of “transcribed”?

Experts in the field analyze the manuscripts. Did they undergo any training in the use of the checklist?

5. Media-comparative study: Even if the authors clarify the methods, I have a much deeper concern about the generalizability of this study. The best the authors can conclude is that their so-called web-based intervention was better that their traditional intervention and I emphasize “their.” Each intervention seems to be a combination of many approaches. Which approach is responsible for the results we will never know. There are just too many variables and confounders to account for that we will not be able to discern the contribution of the “web-based” approach. Please review:


Are the data sound?
No.

Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
No.

Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
The first three paragraphs in the discussion read like an extension of the results section. The authors just paraphrase their results. The authors can delete these entire paragraphs without affecting the discussion. It will be difficult to provide more feedback on the discussion until the authors address the issues in the methods section.

Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
No.

Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
No, the authors ignore the growing body of research and literature in medical e-learning choosing to concentrate in non-medical sources. The authors need to pay more attention to specific differences in the pedagogical or educational technology approaches of the studies they quote and in that way explain their own results. It is not enough to say that findings are consistent or not with other studies. They have to discuss how their methods differ for that of others so we they can better explain their results and contribute to the literature.
Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes

Is the writing acceptable?
Frequent use of the passive voice.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
'I declare that I have no competing interests’