Reviewer's report

Title: A randomized controlled study to determine the difference in the quality of scientific writing under standard writing and online writing groups

Version: 2 Date: 17 January 2009

Reviewer: Patricia A Reynolds

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   This has now been re-phrased and is much better.

Introduction:
A detailed description of the authors definitions of distance learning and e-learning are provided, but without a reference. To describe e-learning as an offshoot of distance learning is somewhat disparaging of e-learning. e-Learning is described by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) as 'learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology', http://www.elearning.ac.uk/effprac/html/start_defin.htm

This means that the classroom–based group had support that could be considered to have an e-learning component, so it is important to reference the definitions.

A literature review now appears in this section as suggested.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
   The clarification of design has improved this section and Figure 1 is very helpful.

   It has now emerged that some participants came from Brazil and USA, it is good to see this stated, although the numbers, primary language and whether the online course and mentor support was in English or Portuguese is not stated. Clearly some student' manuscripts were written in Portuguese and translated, as this is was stated as being checked by one observer. As stratification on the basis of origin was not carried out, this should be alluded to in the limitations of the study.

   It is good to see the definitions of abbreviations, statistical measures clarified and an explanation that the qualitative analysis is published elsewhere. However, the reference number for the 'qualitative analysis elsewhere' needs to be corrected as 37 refers to a paper from 1999. 39 appears to be the correct reference.

   A clear comment needs to be made in the methods that students completed differing sections in the manuscripts. The results section (Table 2) shows that there is no difference between two sections of the manuscript completed by the students.
Implementation: Sentence 2

“An experienced researcher from ‘our’ group provided guidance to participants who wished to formulate their own research question. What is ‘our’ group?

3. Are the data sound?
The clarification that the communications events were a post-hoc analysis and that the qualitative analysis was reported elsewhere are a good improvement. However, a short summary of the relevance of qualitative findings relating to this study (but reported elsewhere) would be helpful.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
The manuscript is now well set out and clear, having been extensively rewritten. However, the references need attention.

References 29 and 32 were noted to have been last accessed on the web in 2002. Reference numbers do need checking.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
The revision has produced a much more balanced discussion on the data. Having a conclusion now completes this manuscript.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
The limitations section is important. However, the first sentence is not helpful. “We could not address all potential confounders listed earlier” Where were they listed, what are they?

A comment concerning no stratification and issues concerning potential differences between students from Brazil and USA should be made here.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
Such work is discussed in the introduction and revisited in the discussion, however, the Future work section is very brief and needs a little expansion.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Following revision, this is now much more consistent.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
This paper has been extensively revised and is now much more clearly written, with care in answering and/or addressing all the comments. However, there are still mixtures of first and third person descriptions in differing parts of the manuscript and some lack of attention to detail is still evident.
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests'