Reviewer's report

Title: Investigating the utility of an online discussion group for health professionals: a case example from forensic occupational therapy.

Version: 1 Date: 26 November 2012

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Major compulsory revisions:
1. You need to explain what forensic occupational therapy is in order to put the material into context for the reader.

2. In the background, paragraph 1, the last sentence seems out of place and relates more to the last paragraph of your background. I also believe this point could benefit from further elaboration and discussion and perhaps you could make some recommendations in relation to using online discussion forums as a place of research.

3.. Purpose of the study: The research question and purpose of doing the research need to be more clearly articulated. Judging from the title you have used, it seems as though the question is around the utility of online discussion forums, but for the content of your paper, it is more about purpose of the forums – your findings and discussion need to respond to your research question.

4.. Introduction and background: To make the information more easily transferable to other contexts, you need to explain the history behind why the discussion group was initiated (was there an unmet need amongst this group of practitioners? Do they tend to be working in sole positions without a supportive team?), how the discussion group was promoted when it was initially set up, the process for joining, whether or not it was moderated/ checked for misleading or inappropriate posts. It also needs to be declared whether any of the authors were involved in the setting up and moderating of the group and what your interest is in doing the research.

5.. Recommendations arising from your study: In the last paragraph of your introduction, you raise some very pertinent issues around ethics, privacy and consent and I believe these need addressing further in relation to how online discussion forums could be set up in the future. You have identified that online discussion forums serve a purpose, but have not given any recommendations
arising from the findings from your study.

6. Ethical considerations: You have addressed ethics at the beginning of the methods, but please elaborate on the “no expectations of privacy” aspect meaning that no ethical approval was required? I would like to see this information referenced with evidence that this was explored fully in relation to all aspects of your study, especially the extraction of what people wrote on the forum.

7. Method: You study had some quantitative components as well, so please rethink your study design of “qualitative case study”

8. Results:
   • You have arrived at 9 ‘themes’, but suggest these could be consolidated? You could probably get these down to 6. The information under ‘exchanging information’ seems to be about ‘seeking and giving advice’. The ‘seeking and giving advice’ section needs more structure and flow and could even benefit from some subheadings. Is the content under ‘miscellaneous’ part of networking?
   • The info under ‘coordinating PD opportunities’ contains potentially identifiable information – I suggest you remove the quote or remove the aspects of it that relate to specific events.
   • Under ‘student learning’ was the debate amongst the moderators, or part of the posts? Please elaborate on this with some more detail.
   • It is necessary to see clear distinction between when you are reporting quantitative findings and when you are reporting qualitative. Suggest you have these as headings underneath ‘Results’ and drop the heading ‘online discussion forum usage’.
   • Please explain how you identified where postings originated from.
   • Later in your paper you describe that it was difficult to work out country of origin for postings and yet in table 1, you do not have an unknown section – suggest you also add ‘unknown’ to table 1 to account for the number of postings where you were not sure.

9. Discussion: In the last sentence of the last paragraph of your discussion, you raise the issue about lack of collaborative research opportunities emerging from the online group – was this something that you were hoping to see from the group? This seems to be a topic worthy of more exploration, both in the introduction and in the discussion. Is lack of research in relation to forensic OT an ongoing issue?

10. Limitations: are you suggesting that a study using deeper, interpretive analysis would be desirable/useful? Perhaps a suggestion for future research? I suggest that this limitation is also a recommendation and would benefit from a clearer explanation about how you were limited by the content of the postings that you were examining and how you did not have opportunity to probe further about the purposes for the individuals using the discussion group.

Minor essential revisions:
1. Methods:

• sentence 3: suggest reword to – “A case study method was used to access and analyse eight years of online postings in the forensic occupational therapy discussion group beginning …”

• Sentence beginning “The first author…” Suggest replace “wrote a detailed analysis of each theme” with “wrote a detailed summary of each theme”

2. Results:

• Please replace autumn of 2008 with actual months as in the southern hemisphere, autumn is from March – May.

• Under requesting and sharing material resources, please revise to ‘occupational therapy assessment’ rather than ‘occupational assessment’

3. Discussion: The second paragraph, suggest reword to: “…during the initial years was centred in the United Kingdom”

Discretionary Revisions:

1. In the second paragraph of your background, you are describing some of the existing literature – however, the relevance of some of this information in relation to the purpose of your study is questionable - particularly the information about lurkers – how does that relate to your study?

2. Throughout the discussion, very few references have been used. It would be useful to the reader, to compare the points you are making with other research.

3. Consider whether case example as used in the title is the most accurate reflection of what your paper is about.

4. In the last sentence of paragraph 2, consider putting the actual number of postings in the text as well as the percentage of decline over the years (from 248 – 128).

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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