Reviewer’s report

Title: What are the applications of social constructivist learning theories in knowledge translation for healthcare professionals: a scoping review

Version: 2 Date: 12 September 2013

Reviewer: Carl May

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for asking me to review this interesting and well-written paper. The paper has two core themes running through it.

The first is a strong case for theoretically informed research in KT. The authors emphasise the value of theory in informing intervention designs and research questions, and they also make the point that over-arching theoretical frameworks have important consequences for framing the wider field of implementation science.

The second theme relates to mapping out the terrain of social constructivist research in KT. This is a scoping review, so the authors may have missed some studies. Even so, their analysis makes a strong case that the application of social constructivist theory has led to a relatively small body of work that after many years of development remains empirically weak and theoretically under-developed.

This scoping review shows the limited value of this body of theory when compared with what we know about more robust social learning theories from psychology. The results of the scoping review rather undermine the authors’ claim that a full systematic review of research in this field is required. Indeed it also seems to me to convincingly undermine the claim that further primary research informed by social constructivist concepts is needed. Results and recommendations of primary research described here are hard to pin to a specific theory of any kind. (e.g. ‘differences in knowledge acquisition and application were believed to be associated with level of experience and expertise’ (p14); ‘learners are actively engaged in the learning process and they bring their unique perspectives to the learning situation’ (p13)). Primary research studies discussed in this paper raise some fairly substantial ‘so what?’ questions.

As it stands the paper makes a strong case for theory but this is one that has been widely made and is increasingly accepted. The paper’s claim to be publishable is therefore founded on the assertion that social constructivist theory (and the primary research informed by it) is of substantive value in contributing to KT and IS. This claim is not convincingly made. So:

The authors need to clearly separate the strongly supported claim that KT and IS research should be theory-informed from the weakly supported claim that social
constructivist theory can make an important contribution to this field.

The authors need to answer the ‘So what?’ question. They must clearly demonstrate that social constructivist research does in fact lead to specific results rather than general assertions, and that these results have demonstrable value that would merit investment of time and resources a full systematic review.

- Major Compulsory Revisions
- Minor Essential Revisions
  None
- Discretionary Revisions
  None

**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'