

# PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING ENHANCES THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS

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## **Abstract**

*The concept of problem-learning (PBL) originated at McMaster University, Canada in 1969 as medical educators were looking for a more effective teaching and learning method for preparing learners for clinical practice. Problem-based learning (PBL) is a student-centred pedagogy in which students learn about a subject by solving open-ended problems in simulated real life situations. This paper is a reflection on my experience of problem based learning in both classroom and small group meetings. I have found PBL to be a good strategy for enhancing social skills and problem solving. The team approach to scenario analysis and to managing group dynamics has helped us to tap from the diverse strength of team members. This has enhanced our creativity and on-going learning. In future course offerings, students' participation could be enhanced by sharing scenarios with them well ahead of class presentations. In addition, both faculty and students need training on PBL.*

## **Background and Introduction**

The concept of problem-learning (PBL) originated at McMaster University, Canada in 1969 as medical educators were looking for a more effective teaching and learning method for preparing learners for clinical practice (Savery, 2015). Problem-based learning is a student-centred pedagogy in which students learn about a subject by solving an open-ended problem found in simulated real life situation and circumstance. Instead of requiring that students study content knowledge and then practice context-free problems, PBL embeds students' learning processes in real-life problems (Loyens, Magda, & Rikers, 2008). Problem-based learning begins with the team (small group) receiving a written scenario of an ill-structured problem. The role of the lecturer is more like that of a facilitator and coach of student learning, acting at times as a resource person, rather than as knowledge-holder and transmitter.

PBL has been adopted within nursing education in various parts of the world, such as Australia, China, the United Kingdom and South Africa (Hassan, 2010). Although there is limited evidence about the use of PBL in nursing education in Botswana, the approach to

learning and teaching has been reported to encourage self-directed learning and to enhance mastery of clinical skills (Dithole, Sandy, & Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2013).

This paper is a reflection on my experience with problem based learning in both classroom and small group meetings and therefore cover team learning, class sessions, and what I benefitted from experience. Lastly, I provide a concluding statement and some recommendations for getting the best out of PBL.

## **My Experience of Problem-based Learning**

### **The Learning Team**

The class was divided into six groups of 5-6 members. For every learning scenario, each team appointed a chairperson/leader and recorder/secretary. In order to ensure fair participation of all team members, we rotated in leading/chairing meetings and in recording proceedings of meetings as well as distributed what was recorded to all team members. Because of commitments at our different workplaces, the average meeting attendance for my team was 4 of 6 members. As a team, we usually reviewed the scenario together; and I believe this strategy provided an opportunity for us to share knowledge and expertise and that it enriched our scenario analysis. The scenarios addressed different content areas of the course. We designated the team leader and the secretary presenters for the class. We would draft and practice our presentation and take care of any other last-minute details. What I believe my team failed to do very well was submission of individual assignments on time. However, consideration the work schedule of individual members, I applaud my team for “a job well done.”

The extent to which a meeting will be fruitful is said to be dependent on prior preparation (Czekanski& Wolf, 2013; Peck, Werner, & Raleigh, 2013). Within my busy schedule of full-time work and part-time school, I made sure that I did not miss team meetings. I made it a point that I completed my individual assignments on time; and sometimes I would send my write-up to the team members electronically; in order that they could give me their input before the day of presentation. I would go a mile further to research on other group members’ assignments sometimes. I used Google Scholar and the library to search for information so that I could bring informed and evidence-supported arguments to the discussion table. Not only did I research on the scenario content but also, I reviewed literature on how to work with groups; and this enabled me to manage group dynamics. When I was leading the team, I would send meeting reminders to team members. Being partly inspired by the following words that my supervisor at work likes using: “If you do not speak in a meeting, you do not add value to the world,” I have come to believe that generously sharing my thoughts adds value to my social interactions. As a result, I often found myself dominating small team discussions. I was actively involved in team meetings, provoking others’ views, ideas and concerns. I would probe others’ to contribute to the discussion and note down their points for inclusion in the group’s write-up.

## **Class Sessions**

Within class, there were those who would be well prepared for the class session and those who were not. I would say were those who had background information on the subject under discussion were usually more participative than those who did not. Some members tended to dominate the discussions that followed the teams' presentations. Class members' participation tended to gain momentum as people began to grasp the concept of problem-based learning. Personally, I participated well in the first two sessions of the class in which we explored common concepts in health promotion and theoretical frameworks frequently used to guide health promotion. This is because the content and its sequence were clearly articulated in the course outline. Advanced knowledge with regard what the class sessions would address helped me to search for information in readiness for the class.

It was when we started on PBL scenarios that I found myself struggling in contributing to class discussions. There were a total of 12 PBL scenarios presented in class and I found myself more than 75% of the time going to class with no idea about what content was going to be addressed. Sometimes I would not even know who was going to be leading the presentation. This was so because the scenarios were given only to assigned team(s). The situation made it difficult for me to prepare for the class. It was only in the two occasions that my team was presenting that I came to class knowing what was going to be discussed.

My participation gradually improved as I became more familiar with PBL and as I began to catch up with the central themes in the discussions. I became active in class discussion because even when I did not volunteer my contribution, the facilitator would sometimes ask for my opinion as she would be inviting the contribution of those who seemed to be reserved. My background working in a substance use disorders centre particularly gave me confidence to significantly contribute to the discussion on health promotion for clients misusing alcohol. My team did wonderful job in the two scenarios it was assigned; our presentations were thoroughly researched, well organized, and comprehensively addressed.

One of the drawbacks during class sessions was that the lecture room which we were using did not have a projector for us to visually display our presentations. This made to lose focus, and sometimes failing to grasp key points. Furthermore I felt that the lecture's role as a facilitator in PBL is not enough to make the learner knowledgeable about a concept.

## **What I have Benefitted from the PBL Experience**

The learning team opportunity has enhanced my skills for respecting and appreciating other people's points of view. I learned to listen, and to express my ideas in a way that others can understand as well as to handle opinions that differ from mine, and how to handle criticism. I learned how to obtain information to enhance my knowledge. I developed important speaking skills; and through scenario analysis, I have been able to engage in collective decisions making. PBL presented a forum for students to make input into their learning and opportunity for enhancement of sense of responsibility.

The team approach to scenario analysis and to managing group dynamics has helped us to tap from the diverse strength of team members. This has enhanced creativity and on-going learning. As we reviewed and analysed scenarios together, we got connected to one another. I have learned that team meetings are a good place for learning about working in teams and carrying the team through meeting its objectives. As Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) noted, as each student takes charge of own learning, team learning encourages them to dialogue with and support one another. Working in teams provided us with a safe environment where we could share information amongst ourselves. Though the guidance of designated team leaders, we were able to keep the discussions focused and to manage the group dynamics. Even though we failed to submit one of our assignments on time, generally my team was able to reach its targets.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

I have found PBL as a good learning-teaching strategy for enhancing social skills and problem solving. The learning team opportunity has enhanced my skills for respecting and appreciating other people's points of view. I learned to listen, and to express my ideas in a way that others can understand as well as to handle opinions that differ from mine, including criticism. I have become more aware of diverse ways of obtaining information to enhance my knowledge; and through scenario analysis, I have been able to engage in collective decision making. PBL presented a forum for us to make input into our learning and an opportunity for enhancement of our sense of responsibility.

The team approach to scenario analysis and to managing group dynamics has helped us to tap from the diverse strength of team members. This has enhanced creativity and on-going learning. As we reviewed and analysed scenarios together, we got connected to one another. I have learned that team meetings are a good place for learning about working in teams and carrying the team through meeting its objectives. As Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) noted, team learning encourages students to dialogue with and to support one another. Working in teams provided us with a safe environment where we could share information amongst ourselves.

In PBL, students are engaged in development of a new knowledge base and become active learners, taking control of their learning and reflecting upon their own ideas rather than those of the lecturer. In addition, they develop social skills through interacting with one another. Course offering could be improved by sharing learning scenarios with all students well ahead of class presentations. This could provide students with a chance to familiarize themselves with scenarios and enhance their class participation. In addition, visually projecting presentation is vital because it enhances understanding of a concept. Finally I would say PBL is effective as it enhanced my analytical skills. Through interacting with other students, my social skills have been enhanced. It was an enjoyable experience for me!

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