PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING PRESENTS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR NURSING EDUCATION

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Abstract

Problem-based learning (PBL) has gained popularity in many learning institutions globally. PBL is a student-centered approach in which students learn about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem. It exposes students to both thinking strategies and domain knowledge. It stimulates learning curiosity among students through challenging problems. This paper reports on my personal experience of PBL. My experience with PBL has been a journey of frustration and confusion at the start and a triumph at the end. I have found PBL to be a practical way of learning that provides an integrated way of looking at phenomena. It offers several advantages over traditional teaching methods including cultivation of a sense of ownership of learning, responsibility, and accountability. However, it is important that PBL course offering be preceded by a comprehensive students' orientation to the method; and that requisite resources be provided.

Background and Introduction

Problem-based learning (PBL) has gained popularity as an effective teaching and learning approach with several advantages over the traditional teacher designed lecture method (Onyon, 2012; Savery, 2015). Savery (2015) defined problem based learning as a student-centered approach in which students learn about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem. PBL provides learners with an opportunity to learn both the thinking strategies and the domain knowledge (Savery, 2015). In PBL, learners play an active part in addressing the learning objectives; with their curiosity being stimulated by the challenging and exciting problems presented to them (Preeti, Ashish and Shriram, 2013). Their practical involvement in the solution of a problem enhances their participation and their learning as they exchange feedback among themselves and between themselves and the learning facilitator (Borrego, 2013).

In this paper, I share my experience of PBL as it was used in a Master of nursing science course that I took. The course content was learned in the context of individual, family, or community problems depicting health issues with a potential to attract the attention of nurses. The scenarios or problems presented stories about the day-to-daily lives of people. My experience is organized into how the method was introduced to the class, the learning scenarios, learning team, and what I benefited from PBL. I end the paper with a conclusion and recommendations.

My experience of using PBL approach to learning and teaching

How Problem-learning was Introduced to the Class

The lecturer introduced the course and informed us that the learning-teaching would follow the PBL approach. She then provided us with brief description of PBL and provided references that we could consult to learn more about PBL. Initially, I got worried that I had wasted my time coming for studying in this institution whereas I could have applied to other universities because I was not going to learn anything from the course. I wondered whether coming to class was worth it if I was not going to be taught. I spent years not enrolling in masters' degree because I was waiting for an opportunity whereby I would be a full-time student who would always be physically present in class ready for "being taught." I had not considered distance or on-line learning as an option because I did not think I could manage self-directed learning. When we were informed that we were going to work in groups, I became even more worried and discouraged as I know what it meant, particularly considering the dynamics of working in groups that I did not think I could tolerate.

Learning Scenarios

When we were given the first scenario or problem, we took it lightly and asked ourselves if it really had anything for our learning. It made me think the worst about the course and believed that it was a waste of time. Initially it was difficult for me to identify my learning to determine what I needed to know beyond what I knew. This was difficult because basically the problem analysis is about what I do not know as a learner, which is rather awkward because what I do not know is an infinite phenomenon. The question in my mind was; "if I had never known something, how would I know what I do not know if nothing has never been drawn to my knowledge about it?" Through everybody's input it improved with more scenarios. The way scenarios were made also helped me built and improved skill and knowledge because their sequence was designed to build on one another. This was in line with what Barrett (2014) and Chan (2013) recommended that the content be logically sequenced in order to build a foundation subsequent learning. There was an improvement with the second scenario although we struggled with application of a conceptual framework.

After the presentation of the first assignment and the facilitator's feedback, some new light began to be shed; and that changed my view of PBL. As we tackled more scenarios, our commitment and responsibility as a team increased because we realized that those were not just scenarios; rather, they were stimuli for our critical thinking about real-life situations. Team members started to value every member's contribution as critical for learning outcomes. Different perspectives brought into scenario analysis were welcome.

Team Learning

Communication was a challenge initially as we could not listen to each other or give one another chance to make a contribution. I would lose patience when my colleagues criticized me even when we were reminded to respect others' opinions. As time went on, however, we realized that we were wasting a lot of time defending our personal opinions. On that, the facilitator advised that we use literature to support our arguments; and this reduced the time we used defending our personal opinions. We also experienced challenges when some members failed to turn up for

meetings and did not give any explanations for that. We were frustrated because member absenteeism was retarding the team's progress. I was particularly frustrated when some were absent from meetings without apology, when some failed to be punctual, when meetings were postponed at the last minute, and when some members failed to commit to completing assigned tasks.

As time went on, I started to accept that we were different and that each one of us had a unique approach to issues. Working with my team members, listening to each person's opinions, ideas, and response to others provided an opportunity for me to know their strengths and weaknesses. As I came to know my team members better, our interpersonal relationships began to flourish. It now made sense to me to appreciate appreciating each team member's strengths and weaknesses. Group work has been found to enhance learners' communication skills and ability to manage group dynamics; and through its enhancement of a sense of community, to encourage their openness to sharing points of view and asking questions (Li and Lam, 2013). It has been noted that team diverse views promote discussion among group members and keep students motivated to learn more about the subject (Savery, 2015; Sherif, 2015). I gradually came to realize that for PBL to yield good results, active group participation; and that therefore one member's absence from a meeting creates a gap in problem solving; as each member's unique contribution is important for the group's decision making. As communication is instrumental to interpersonal relationships, it is important that group members agree on and set the rules for communicating with one another as poor communication can kill team spirit and motivation for learning.

What I benefitted from PBL

The PBL experience unveiled to me the "leader in me." As we worked on the scenarios, it became evident that although group members had a chance to be leaders in scenario assignments, there was always an entrusted team leader for the entire course offering period; and I found myself to be that person. It was a good experience for me to have been both a follower and a leader; and I believe given the opportunity to lead, I will confidently help my team achieve its goals. I have found the potential in me that posit me as a potential good leader and team player.

PBL helped my professional development through providing me with an opportunity to switch from a passive recipient of what comes from the lecturer to constructing solutions to open-ended, complex problems. Working on complex scenarios has improved my knowledge, skill and attitude and enabled me to look at client's needs more holistically than I have been. The self-directed learning experience transformed me into an independent, responsible and committed learner. I learned that learning should not be restrictive as opposed to a traditional way of teaching where objectives present a circumscribed limit to students' learning. I experienced learning as an exploratory process that can take place anywhere anytime.
      I also learned much on management of group dynamics; I learned how to manage working relationship in such a way that they are sustained. Tensions, misconceptions, and conflicts that our team went through proved to be a memorable learning curve. I have learned that every individual is unique and that it is the uniqueness that brings about diverse approaches to problem solving. I have come to appreciate that teamwork is important for goal achievement and that every member of the team is important because we all think, work and organize

ourselves in many peculiar ways and that at the end we all contribute in special ways toward a common goal.

I have appreciated the use of conceptual frameworks and the consideration of culture, health care ethics and culture in the analysis of scenarios. Application of a framework was the most difficult part at the beginning. It got clearer after the facilitator shared how a model from engineering discipline was used to organize a study on a health issue. I had come across a number of frameworks some of which I could not understand. What challenged me the most was to choose an appropriate framework for a given scenario. I would have the framework and the scenario running parallel instead of integrating the two. I can now confidently apply any framework of any discipline to any presented situation appropriately. I learned that theories are just frames that give shape to a meaningless data and organize phenomena at hand.

I also had the opportunity to interrogate a number of policies as we had to determine the policy implications for each scenario. I have been able to identify the strengths and limitations of some policies and I believe I have been empowered to be able to refer to specific policies and to contribute to policy development and review as I work with clients. The consideration of culture in the analysis of the scenarios has enhanced my appreciation of the value of culture in health care delivery. As much as it is important to involve and inform clients when we work with them, one needs, also, to always consider their cultural values and beliefs as cultural insensitivity of health professionals can negatively impact on the achievement of intended outcomes (Leape et al., 2012). I have learned that as part of assessment and care of a client, advocating for policy that is supportive of health promotion for diverse populations and getting acquainted to communities' culture are integral to the planning and delivery of health services.

Conclusion and Recommendations

My experience with PBL has been a journey that started as frustrating and confusing and ended with a sense of accomplishment. I have found PBL to be a practical way of learning that provides an integrated way of looking at phenomena. It offers several advantages over traditional teaching methods including cultivation of a sense of ownership of learning, responsibility, and accountability on the part of the learner. It makes the learning environment challenging and stimulating. PBL can empower graduates for critical and independent thinking. It has a potential to prepare innovative professionals who can build positive relationships with clients and approach health issues in a holistic manner. However, it is evident that learners need an intense orientation to the method as well as continuous guidance and mentorship in order that the transition from the traditional learning can be smooth; and obviously this goes with resources including time.

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