

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING: A STEP TO QUALITY NURSING EDUCATION

Seitebatso Odiseng, RN, BNS.

School of Nursing

University of Botswana

E-mail: seityod@yahoo.com

Cell. 72683073

Abstract

Problem-based learning (PBL) has its origin in medical education but has since spread to other fields including nursing education. It is a learner-centered approach that empowers learners to research on a topic on their own and to apply resultant knowledge in the solution of real-life problems. This approach uses group learning as a stimulus for interaction. In this paper, I share my experience of PBL teaching/learning approach as a learner and I focus on the learning scenarios, team learning and its dynamics, and how the approach enhanced my professional development. I have found PBL to be an ideal learning approach for graduate education because it incorporates some attributes of adult education. It prepares learners for leadership and management by cultivating skills of teamwork, communication and problem-solving. However, I believe that the quality of learning could be even more enhanced if PBL is used along with traditional methods of instruction.

Background and Introduction

Problem-based learning (PBL), which has its origin in medical education, is now used in many disciplines (Mansur, Kayastha, Makaju, & Dongol, 2014). PBL is a learning approach that is learner-centred rather than instructor-centred. It empowers learners to explore a topic on their own through research, integration of theory and practice, as well as application of knowledge in the context of the real-life situation problem that learner must solve (Savery, 2015). The remarkable thing about PBL is that learners generate their own learning goals to direct subsequent self-directed learning (Rotgans, O'Grady, & Alwis, 2011). PBL was introduced to the class at the beginning of the semester by the lecturer (facilitator in PBL terms) in one course that I took in Master of Nursing Science programme. In this paper, I share my experience of PBL teaching/learning with a focus on the learning scenarios, team learning and group dynamics and how I believe my participation in the course contributed to my professional development. Learning about PBL has been a journey with both triumphs and challenges. Even though some aspects have proved vital for me as a graduate learner, there are those that I believe could have been contextualised for graduate nursing students.

My Experience of the PBL Approach

Briefing of the Class on PBL

In her briefing, the facilitator highlighted that PBL puts more responsibility on the learner because it is self-directed. She indicated that learning teams would be working on scenarios that would be based on real-life situations. The interesting component of the briefing was that for all the scenarios that we would be presented with, we had to come up with what we knew about the problem before us; that is, determining our prior knowledge. Prior knowledge was important in that it would assist us in identifying our knowledge gaps; and it was instrumental in the development of learning goals which guided our search for what we did not know.

In PBL, it is interesting that it is the learners, and not the facilitator, who drive the learning. It was something totally new to me to learn that in PBL the tutor is not a provider of information but plays the role of guiding the learners (Donnér & Edgren, 2015). The facilitator challenged us through questioning and suggesting ideas as well as guiding us and ensuring that class discussions were focused. This helped us to be focus and to be able to think outside the box. Moreover, her ability to present the course content and expectations in an understandable way assisted us to grasp the concept of PBL. Furthermore, in my PBL experience, even though the learner has to take the lead, I have realized that the facilitator must be actively involved in generating the learners' interest and motivation to learn. This in turn affects the quality of learning. According to Oda, Onishi, and Sakemi (2014), the tutor's performance has an influence on both the process and the outcome of students' learning.

Learning Scenarios

The scenarios made me curious about the appropriateness of PBL for graduate students and adult learners that we were as a class. This prompted me to look for more information on PBL and the adult learner. I found out that adults need to know first why they have to learn something, that they value learning that relates to their everyday life, and that they have preference for problem-centered learning (Onyon, 2012). It has also been noted that PBL and adult education share many elements that enhance the teaching/learning process, that the adult learner takes an active role in learning, and that prior knowledge and experience play a critical role in problem solving (Pappas, 2013). The literature that I reviewed helped me to appreciate PBL as an appropriate teaching/learning approach for the graduate learner that I was.

The use of real-life scenarios as a trigger for learning has been useful but it would have been best if it involved real-life situations. According to Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt (2016), because contact with the profession forms part of the learning experience, PBL implemented in the classroom may be limited. I believe that it would be best if all scenarios were about the nursing profession. Some scenarios made us to focus more on other professions such as social work. I strongly believe that because nurses work in a multidisciplinary team, it would have been much better to be given scenarios focusing on nursing as there are many issues in nursing that need our urgent attention. Such issues include among others, policy, quality improvement, staff development, orientation and preceptorship.

Team Learning and Group Dynamics

One of the characteristics of PBL is the use of group or team learning as a stimulus for interaction. The interaction has to be at the levels of small learning team and the larger class. However, because there were only five of us taking the course, there was only one team. As such, the facilitator was the only person who was unaware of what the team had prepared for class presentation. In order to minimize the monotony of class discussions and to encourage active participation of all members, each member avoided doing intensive research on tasks that were assigned to other team members. Class interactions helped cultivate interpersonal skills which, according to Skinner, Hyde, McPherson, and Simpson (2016), are important for professional and client-provider relationships.

Even though working with the group had its benefits, progress was slow because often some group members had other commitments and could not make it to team meetings. This slowed down progress and compromised learning. In fact, group dynamics proved to be an outstanding challenge in PBL. Generally there was poor time management in our group due to late coming. This resulted in starting proceedings late and failing to meet the targets for the meeting. The team leader's comments on the successes and challenges of the team at the end of every scenario helped to sensitize members to factors such as poor time management and

commitment to results. It helped us to reflect on our performance and to improve in our subsequent work. It brought team members together in decision making and encouraged each of us to take more responsibility for the progress of the team.

Enhancement of Professional Development

I see PBL as an opportunity for enhancement of professional development which is critical in graduate education. There was a team leader for every scenario who guided the teams' work and ensured that there was direction and progress. This is a positive step in preparing a graduate learner for leadership and managerial responsibilities. It presented an opportunity for us to hone communication and collaboration skills. PBL can also help in reducing incivility in the workplace which includes disrespectful behaviors and unwillingness to listen to others' points of view. According to Clark, Ahten, and Macy (2014), PBL scenarios are an effective strategy for instructing nursing students on the topic of incivility. Clark and colleagues posited that if incivility is not addressed in training institutions, it may continue when students enter the workforce, negatively impacting working relations among nurses and compromising the quality of patient care. PBL team learning experiences can empower graduates to successfully work with co-workers and supervisors who may otherwise be difficult to work with.

The insight that I gained from team learning group dynamics has helped me to appreciate the importance of anticipating issues in team group work and taking proactive steps to prevent them or manage them should they arise. I have learned that ignoring problems will only make them worse and therefore difficult to handle. This is because I saw our team going through a rough time when we left the group dynamics to unfold without being interrupted. Once we took action to address the issues, individuals' commitment to team work improved and learning experiences improved. Handling issues as they arise could help enhance learners' development of interpersonal skills that are important in managing human relations at the workplace (Skinner et al., 2016).

As part of the course requirement, my learning team developed and implemented a community project to raise women's breast and cervical cancer awareness and prevention. I found myself easily transferring what I learned in the classroom to working with real people. I have therefore realized that PBL facilitates learning transfer. I therefore believe that learners need to be evaluated on whether they can apply PBL in their respective specialty areas, not just in general situations and scenarios. Hung (2013) argued that learning transfer in adult learning is not just a cognitive ability but a survival skill because what is learned has to be applied in diverse situations of the workplace.

Conclusion and Recommendations

I have found PBL to be an ideal learning approach in graduate education because it incorporates some attributes of adult education. It prepares learners for leadership and management by cultivating teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills. I believe that this learning approach will go a long way in improving the quality of nursing education which can be translated to quality client care and collaborative working relationships. However, PBL can be a challenge to learners if group dynamics are not well managed. More discipline-specific scenarios could do better than more open ones in preparing learners for addressing real-life problems.

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