

# PROBLEM BASED LEARNING ACTIVATES INNER POTENTIALS AND BROADENS THE MIND

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## Abstract

*Problem-based learning (PBL) learning has its roots in several learning theories; notably the constructivism theory. It is an approach to learning in which the problems act as the context and driving force for learning, which occurs in small groups. PBL has been said to enhance student's motivation for learning, deeper understanding of the subject, and development of high order cognitive skills. The purpose of this write up is to share my experience of PBL. PBL increased my interest in the subject as I read extensively. My learning came to be motivated not only by a desire to pass the course but also by the need to satisfy my own curiosity for knowledge and my personal development. Team learning and team leadership helped me to learn to work with and manage people with diverse attitudes and skill levels. I would recommend PBL mainly for its ability to broaden the mind.*

**KEYWORDS:** PBL, Student, facilitator.

## Background and Introduction

Problem-based Learning (PBL) is an approach to learning/teaching whereby the learner is presented with a problem first, followed by a systematic student-directed process of learning (Spoken-Smith, 2005). PBL started in medical education at McMaster University in Canada in the 1960s but has since spread to related fields such as nursing, social work, dentistry, and veterinary science and to disciplines such as law, architecture, management, and engineering (Boud & Feletti, 1991).

An important part of the learning process takes place in small groups which are given problems that trigger and motivate learning (Dochy, Segers, Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003). The tutor's role in a group is to facilitate learning (Schmidt, 1983). The development of PBL has had a lot of influence from the constructivism theory that holds that learners are actively involved in

constructing what they learn (Glaserfeld, 1995) and that learning is a communal undertaking (Case & Gunstone, 2002). In PBL, all what is learned as new knowledge is done within the context of the problems.

The purpose of this write up is to share my experience of PBL. My experiences are discussed under the learning environment and facilitation, the learning team, class meetings, and my benefits from the course. Lastly, are the conclusion and the recommendations.

## **My Experience of PBL**

### **Learning Environment and Facilitation**

As it is usually the case at the first at the beginning of the semester, we were excited and eager to find out what the course MNS 606 had for us. However, the excitement did not last long as we were quickly presented with a giant by the name Problem-based Learning (PBL). The lecturer introduced the course outline first, and without any further ado, she introduced PBL to us. We were taken though what PBL is, its merits, and the process that it follows.

We were later asked to divide ourselves into small PBL learning groups comprising (5-8) students. Questions that immediately ran through my mind were “who I am going to work with?” and “what kind of characters am I going to meet?” Presented with no other alternative, my colleagues and I formed a group comprising of six members, five gentlemen and a lady. We were asked to give our groups names that would be meaningful to us. We named our group Health Promotion Gurus mainly because all of us were second years in a class that had first and second years.

The lecturer, tutor/facilitator guided us about PBL language, distributed learning scenarios to groups that would signal the beginning of the PBL process. We got a lot of guidance from the facilitator. I remember we went astray in our first assignment; but the facilitator was patient with us and explained the concepts that we did not understand. She made environment conducive for learning by giving each group equal and fair chance to complete assignments. I would say the environment was conducive for learning, as the lecture established rapport which is very important in learning. From the onset to the last day of the day there was no feeling of isolation for me. The facilitator continued to give us feedback and suggestions for improvement; and this has helped me a lot because now I have something to reflect on. The major challenge in the learning environment was that the room that we were using for class meetings was very small to accommodate all of us. However, that challenge was later to be a motivator for punctuality in the sense because for one to find a comfortable space, punctuality was a must.

The Learning environment enhanced my reasoning and understanding because we were engaged in active learning rather than listening to lectures and memorizing what came from the lecturer only to later on and applied it in subsequent learning and in our daily lives. We dialogued on

what we were learning, diarized it, and verbally articulated it as we were making team and class presentations, related it to our past experiences,

### **The Learning Team**

My team and all other teams were each assigned two scenarios for the semester. Working on the assigned scenario involved group meetings and self-directed learning. The scenario would trigger discussion about what was taking place in there. We made sure that all of us had a clear understanding of problems presented. We agreed on what we already knew and what we needed to know. After that, we set our learning goals. After distributing the learning goals amongst ourselves, self-directed learning commenced. What followed would be team meeting at which each of us would report on his or learning tasks. We would then engage in a discussion that synthesized all knowledge we had gathered and reach a consensus on the extent of our empowerment for what we needed to know about the case/problem.

From the onset it was clear that PBL is all about group work. There is no how one can talk about PBL and leave out group work. We were all motivated to work on our assignments; the challenge of having “free riders” was not an obvious concern. Working on the first assignment was challenging as we initially went astray. It was only after the input of the facilitator that we gained more insight into how to tackle problems. Still with the first assignment, some group members were a bit reserved but this was to change as we moved on. In one study, Woods (1996) found that students were often anxious about the likelihood that they might misunderstand the meanings of the concepts they were working with, and the uncertainty was often frustrating. This finding is similar to what we went through. Often we were frustrated when faced with new concepts that none of us understood. One challenge that we encountered was that often a member would have a good idea but fail to present it in such a way that it would be readily appreciated by others - a question of communication skill.

Other challenges that were particularly a concern when we had to schedule meetings issues such as shift work and wide physical distances between members’ workplace and the meeting place, which was always the university. Safe for the minor inconveniences, in a nutshell, our group was generally productive. We shared tasks fairly and working as a team made the work manageable and reduced the anxiety about challenging assignments. The group presented a support network in case one was stuck. One thing that I learned is that that work becomes easier to manage if every member comes prepared to the meeting and contributes to the deliberations. I believe the group work that I learned from PBL will help me in my future work with groups.

In their study with groups, Bayazit and Mannix (2013) have found that lack of personal conflicts in a group fosters commitment to the group and that when disagreement concerns factual matters, they do not affect commitment. Our team enjoyed member support, cohesion, and

harmony. The mutual respect that prevailed in the group enabled every one of us to freely communicate our ideas. It has been argued that team trust and cooperation are positively related to attitudinal commitment (Costa, 2003). It is therefore important that PBL students have adequate social skills in order that the learning environment can have low conflict and that members can have the willingness to commit to group objectives. The way I see it, it is not personalities that can build or break a group, but the nature of commitment, planning, and human relations skill of members. My position is based on the fact that my group had diverse personalities but I managed to learn from my colleagues within the limited time that we had because all of us were committed to results, we had a work plan, and positive working relationships. It proves that when love and passion reign, anything is possible. Although sometimes it took us more than the anticipated time to find the information that we were looking for, at the end of the day, we found answers.

### **Class Meetings**

Like other teams concerning making up the class, my team worked on two scenarios and shared its report with the class. As by its nature, PBL challenges one to read extensively, I read comprehensively; and it did not matter whether I was presenting to the class or not. The class discussions were equally broad especially when we were addressing relating public policy to the scenarios. Regarding class participation of students in general, sometimes only presenters were talking and they generally had command of the subject matter. There were some who did not seem to have prepared for the class. In short, the concept of “free riders” had a place in the larger class. However, we had an opportunity to hear everybody’s voice because the facilitator would invite the opinion of each and every student, including those who were rather reserved. The class discussion was lively and quite fruitful.

I learned a lot about policies, some of which I knew existed but had never read neither seen them. The PBL class exposed me to what was happening in Botswana. For instance, my reading for a scenario on adolescents exposed me “Policy Guidelines and Service Standards on Sexual and Reproductive Health (MOH, 2011);” when I was reading a scenario on older adults, I learned about “Botswana old age pension was established in 1996,” a universal transfer that benefits all those aged 65 and older. I can now say that my government recognizes the challenges facing older adults and that is it making an effort to meet some of their needs. I am now familiar with many policies and what their provisions are.

## **My Benefits from the Course Offering**

The most important skill that I have learned is the ability to find answers to all the problems posed to me. I had always thought I could shy away from questions I could not answer. However, with PBL, I had to find answers to whatever I was expected to work on. PBL increased my interest in the subject because I was reading a lot. I started to learn for my own knowledge and my own advancement rather than solely for academic performance and marks. I learned more than I had expected to learn as I was driven by interest; I read expansively as I wanted to learn more about what I did not know; and I enjoyed the process, notwithstanding some challenges that I met. The main challenge I encountered was when I could not get all documents about Botswana. I wanted to read as some of those were not available on-line and as trying to get them from the relevant offices the experience was frustrating.

Through team learning and team leadership assignment, I was able to work with people of diverse attitudes, personalities, worldviews and levels of nursing practice backgrounds. The initial phase of group meeting also highlighted the importance of planning and organizing. My teams' very first meeting was rather chaotic because we had not adequately prepared for it. The experience taught us to sit down and work out a plan for our succeeding meetings. I must say, the learning process was not free from stressful moments. However, in the final analysis, I enjoyed the journey through the course as challenges like experience is the best teacher.

It is evident that the instability that my group went through when we started to work together was not our unique experience. Johnson and Johnson (1997) and Wheelan (2003) concurred that when the group meets for the first time, members become a little unstable as they work out how to work together. Indeed, we had not worked with one another before and we did not know what personalities we were about to meet and endure.

Going through the course activated the leadership skills in me that had been dormant all along. I had never known that I could be a leader. I found myself to be a responsible and disciplined person, committing time to complete assigned tasks at stipulated times. Working with colleagues was not much of a challenge as I embraced the notion that every person is unique and has strengths and weaknesses. I treated others with humility, borrowing from the notion of "others first, and I next." As much as I discovered the leadership skills in me, I realized that I did not have it all, and I was therefore open to learning. I became more sensitive to the importance of respect and communication in human relationships. I made it a point that I communicated any unforeseen circumstances such as being caught in a traffic jam to my colleagues so that they would understand if I failed to be punctual at a meeting. My problem solving skills have been enhanced as I have become more objective and open to multiple perspectives in analyzing situations.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the whole semester period that we spent on PBL was a “time well spent.” Of course it is usual that when something is new to us, we find it exciting. I must admit, I am excited about PBL even to this day and I am looking forward to use it. I am humbled and gratified to have acquired so much knowledge in a single semester. I am grateful for the opportunity to be exposed to the concept “problem-based learning” – the approach to learning that is centered on group work. As I indicated earlier on, I started out working for marks, but as time went on, I fell in love with what I was doing and in the end it became something I hold with high esteem. I can therefore boldly recommend problem-based learning to others. My recommendations are that there must be more research on PBL, that educators and students be familiarized with PBL, and that PBL be the way to go for any subject area, as it broadens the mind, enhancing “out-of-the box” thinking and personal development.

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