MY INITIAL NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING LATER MOTIVATED MY LEARNING.

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Abstract

Problem-based learning (PBL) is reported to be an effective student-centered approach to learning that empowers the students with critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal relations, collaboration, creativity, and communication competencies. Critical components of BPL are scenarios, students' active participation through learning teams, reflective diaries and learning facilitation. This paper reports on my experience of PBL and was used in a graduate course that I took. Initially I experienced fear that I would not benefit much from the method. However, my negative emotions soon became a motivation for my learning. I have found PBL to be growth enhancing and I believe the success of learning teams pivots on mutual respect and tolerance of differences of opinion. However, a decision to adopt PBL must be paired with adequate planning and resourcing because the amount of work involved and group dynamics may retard progress, frustrate learners, and compromise learning.

Background and Introduction

Problem-based learning (PBL) is reported to be an effective student-centered-learning that provides learners with an opportunity to develop critical thinking, problem solving, interactions, collaboration, creativity and communication competencies (Miller *et. al.* 2014). The method uses real-life scenarios as a stimulus for learning. The scenarios are presented to small groups of students (learning teams) in order that they can activate what students already know, which provides a foundation for learning what they do not know. Students then search for new information that augments what they know in order to respond to the problem presented in a scenario (Smart *et. al.* 2012). Writing reflective diaries is an integral component of PBL and assists the students to reflect on their intellectual and emotional learning experiences, work on any impediments, capitalize on opportunities and move up the latter of self-actualization (Jones, 2006). Reflective writing integrates theoretical learning, clinical practice, and research information to help students develop skills needed for future professional life and to prepare them for independent life-long learning. The experiences of scenario analysis, team-learning, and reflective diary writing inherent in the PBL approach empower graduates for dealing with multifaceted problems for which ideal solutions do not usually exist (Ling, 2004).

This paper presents a reflection on my learning experience of PBL and the method was used in a graduate course. The paper begins with a background and introduction and proceeds to my experiences that cover briefing of the class on PBL, the learning scenarios, and the learning team and its work. Discussion follows my PBL experience; and the paper ends with conclusion and recommendations.

My experience of Problem Based Learning

Briefing of the Class on Problem-based Learning

At the first contact with the lecturer, the course outline was provided and PBL concept was introduced to us as a method that would be used for the course offering. A briefing on what PBL was and what it entails was done and appropriate references were provided. I was fearful because I had already heard a bit about PBL and that it was not an easy learning method. Many questions and thoughts ran across my mind because I was concerned that I was going to have a tough time. As thoughts and questions were running through my mind, they generated in me curiosity to know more about PBL. The curiosity became a positive driving force to help me prepare for learning about and experiencing PBL.

Learning Scenarios

Each learning team worked on two scenarios. The first scenario given to my team was very complex and I felt frustrated because it demanded that we searched for volumes of information in order to address it. I realized that there was very little that I knew of concerning subjective matter presented in the scenario compared to what I did not know. As I worked on the learning goal that I was assigned, I learned how to think critically; I had to updates my information searching skills because whereas I was struggling with the use of the latest information searching technologies, my team members were expecting results from me. Because the scenario required information from multi-disciplines, I had an opportunity to consults with people outside my discipline. The extensive consultation gave me an opportunity to reflect on culture, health care ethics as I have to respect people as well as protect their rights.

Although I felt that what I needed to know far exceeding what I know when we were presented with the second scenario, I was not as frustrated as I had been with the first scenario because I had an experience that I could tap from. I had an idea about what was expected to do. The scenario was emotionally touching. I felt like I was one of the people going through life experiences depicted in the scenario. My emotional involvement in what was happening motivated me to actively participate in the analysis of what was taking place and contribution to how the problems could best be addressed. As we interrogated policies and programs related to social development and social protection in Botswana, I was emotionally touched as I learned about what the government was doing toward meeting communities' needs. This was because

my mind went back to the struggles that people in my country are going through. The situation in my country became of the motivating factors that motivated me to learn more, with the hope that I might leave the course with ideas that I could take home to make a positive impact on my communities.

Team Meetings and Teamwork

What I learned and did to prepare for team meetings and class sessions in order to get the best out of those was to search for information and prepare some notes well in advance. In addition, I made it a point that I did not miss any team meeting or class session for the entire semester. Also, I learned a lot through asking questions when there was something I did not understand. My learning team had members who were good at information searching. As such, we always had a lot to share. I must admit that sometimes I felt bad because I was not that good at searching information and would not bring much to the team meetings. However, my strength was that whenever my team wanted to refer to the course outline and other materials that the facilitator had distributed to the class I was ready to avail those and I felt good that that I was also making a contribution to teamwork. Team members' anxiety mounted when the day for class presentation or submission of the work for grading approached. However, I was soon to learn that when team members respect one another's point of view and capitalize one another's strengths, anxiety dissipates, creating room for increase team productivity and positive outcomes.

As team leadership had to rotate among the team members, I had an opportunity to lead the team. Organizing meetings was an anxiety-laden task for me as I would be worried about accommodating the needs of my team members who had both work and family commitments in addition to being students. I learned how to communicate through "What's-Up." which I complemented with follow-up telephone calls to in order to confirm that my messages were going through. I would be worried about the possibility that the meeting would fail to take place. This was because one could consider it a 'privilege' to have all members of the team present at any one meeting, considering multiple commitments of full-time employed adult learners. To my delight, out team defeated the odds and had a 100% attendance at all its meetings. As a team leader and meeting convener, I learned to be available at all and even odd times. I remember receiving a telephone call from one team member who was on night shift at 11:00 PM when I was already in bed. All in all, I enjoyed the respect that team members had for one another. Being the oldest member of the team, I was accorded the privilege of offering encouragement to team members on those days that "the sun failed to shine as brightly as one would have expected."

Discussion

From my experience of the PBL course offering, I have learned the value of positive emotions in learning. The fear of PBL that I initially had was creating in me a feeling of incapacity to engage

in the learning process. However, I chose not to entertain those negative emotions but rather, to embrace the unfamiliar news that the lecturer was selling to the class and to prepare for knowing what I did not know. Becker and Rubinstein (2004) argued that fear has a detrimental effect on people's mental state and behavior. However, Becker and colleague posited that fearful people have the capacity to manage their emotions through the use of cognitive strategies. With regard to my curiosity, the way it worked for me is supported by Litman (2005) who sees curiosity as a gift that motivates one to engage in seeking and acquiring new knowledge.

Studies have demonstrated that PBL is undoubtly hard at first and that full adaption to the process can take a long time. The experiences that I went through such as frustrations, concern about work load and others are to be expected in the PBL process; and that with the guidance of the facilitator, learners can successfully go through the learning process and benefit from the merits that PBL offers (Koh et. al. 2014). My engagement in goal setting, critical analysis of the scenarios, researching on what I needed to know, discovering that which I did not know, and reflecting on my learning experiences assisted me to own, retain and use the necessary knowledge and adopt new attitude and behavior. Ling (2004) stated that PBL shifts the focus from knowledge-based to discovery learning; challenging students to think independently, find solutions to problems on their own, and to construct their own experience and body of knowledge. According to Koh et. al. (2014), reflective writing is key to learning from experiences and to helping the learner internalize what is learned.

Team meeting discussions assisted me to remain focused and engaged and as such enabled me to gain new knowledge, attitude and skills for tolerating others' points of view as well as for confidently share my opinion. Learning became fun as team members raised opposing opinions, corrected others' misconceptions, and competed for being listened to. The group dynamics made it look life we were in a fight. However, the meetings usually ended with team members sharing valuable information and bringing together all pieces into the learning goal puzzle. Nel et.al. (2009) posited that the success of learning depends on team members' ability to openly discuss and accept their individual differences and comfort zones. Studies have shown that the diversity of expertise in a team enables it to perform beyond individual's capabilities. As team members were nurses with diverse work and social life experiences, our team was able to tap from our diverse backgrounds. Through team learning and facilitator guidance, BPL carries a potential for optimal learning (Hiller et.al. 2006; Ling 2004).

All its merits notwithstanding, PBL has a potential to be stressful, considering the amount of work involved. Tension my build-up when the dates for completing assignments approach, especially when group dynamics take a good share of the time budgeted for teamwork. Working under time pressure can easily cause stress in a team; and it does not matter whether we are looking at a team of professionals in a company or a group of university students (Lars, 2007). It is therefore important that a decision to adopt PBL as a learning/teaching method goes with adequate planning and resourcing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although initially I had anxiety, doubt and fear because I thought I would not benefit anything from the course offering, the doubts and fears became my leverage force toward embracing PBL. Curiosity propelled me into delving into the world unknown to me. Gradually, the anxiety dissipated, releasing me to be more open to learning. The content and characters in the scenarios were sometimes emotionally challenging, taking me back to the human struggles I have witnessed. Again, that gave me a confirmation that I was the right person at the right place. I found the learning experiences, including the policies that we interrogated, as an opportunity for me to see what I could take home and make a difference in communities back in my country. I have found PBL to be a good strategy for empowering students for dealing with complex issues and for developing leadership skills.

The challenge that I see in PBL, particularly when one considers low resourced environments, is that the method can be stressful to learners if adequate planning ad resourcing are not availed. Such factors as the high responsibility demanded from the learners including managing the group process and group dynamics may frustrate learners and mask the effectiveness of PBL. Adoption of PBL must therefore start with careful planning and resource allocation.

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