Problem-Based Learning: Learning Relevant to Our Lives

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Problem-based learning allows individuals to learn in a relevant and career applicable way. PBL challenges students to use critical thinking skills to solve authentic, real-world problems without clear cut answers (Lee, 2014). Come sink your teeth into a multicultural PBL activity from psychology/social work. Then brainstorm how you might convert your curriculum to a PBL format. PBL is an evidence-based, active learning practice that increases student knowledge retention, problem solving, and motivation.

Outcomes:
Define problem based learning and identify some of the empirical research supporting it. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a PBL approach. Experience first-hand how participating in a PBL activity can be a motivating and challenging experience. Brainstorm at least two possible ways that a PBL approach might strengthen your current course content.

Category: Application
Describe the theory, approach, and revision that you applied in your course, curriculum, or program. Describe what you saw in your students', colleagues', or institution's behavior that you wanted to change. Describe the learning objectives you wanted students or colleagues to better achieve as a result of your application. In teaching introductory graduate level psychology courses focused on helping students develop skills in diagnosing, case conceptualization, and practicing multi-culturally sensitive, evidence-based therapy, I noticed a giant gap that was becoming a chasm that students were falling into. The chasm was a gap between understanding two main areas of learning: 1. How
to think like a psychologist (objectively, critically, scientifically, ethically, keeping one's emotions in check despite difficult case histories and trauma); and 2. How to develop microskills in a low stakes setting (Statham, 2014). These microskills include interviewing clients, diagnosing clients, case conceptualizing, prioritizing treatment needs, assessing progress towards these goals, etc.). Students demonstrated an ability to learn the knowledge associated with these skills, evidenced through reflective papers and integrative tests, yet still struggled with their application. This gap between knowledge and skill competence was most apparent when students who had performed admirably in classes ("A" level work) struggled on practicum, when they were interacting with clients in a high stakes, real-world environment. To help them strengthen these skills, I developed a series of problem-based learning activities including a complex problem-based learning case of a client (Dochy, 2003). The format I used takes many key components of PBL work (the authentic task of reviewing a child's case file; a co-learning model as students learn in groups; students exploring possible solutions to questions that do not have a single "right" answer") but is also novel because the task is scaffolded, with a series of critical thinking questions built-in as the case progresses and a "choose your own ending" format (Lee, 2014).

Describe the project's related course(s) or curriculum, its students, and its place in the curriculum or program.
I have utilized variations of this approach on the undergraduate and graduate level in the psychology program. Our undergraduate students are typically first generation, underprepared, highly diverse, Pell-grant eligible students, and it has worked well with these students as well as our more skilled graduate level students.

How is your application different from ones that others have tried?
I asked myself a series of different questions than I have before: What do I wish I would have been able to practice in my classes when I was a student to be prepared for my actual job? Why did I fall into the same gap that my students were falling into of being a straight A student and then being hired and having no clue of how to think like a psychologist or perform the necessary skills of being one? What was missing in my education that would help bridge this gap for our students to help them develop not only the knowledge, but also the skills, attitudes, and thinking to be able to successful in our field? Likewise, the case studies that I had been exposed to in classes were all straightforward "easy" singular diagnosis, but the work I was doing as a psychologist involved complex cases of children with traumatic abusive case histories and, often, multiple diagnoses. Students needed to be exposed to such complexity, in a low-stakes, scaffolding, success-driven, learning focused way, in order to develop the skills they needed to succeed (Statham, 2014).

Assessment and baseline: Indicate how you determined the success and effectiveness of your application.
I utilize at least two measures to assess learning in each class: a pre-test/post-test knowledge
based questionnaire, and a self-reflective assessment of knowledge and skills given prior to and after the semester. I also have multiple low-stakes clinical application assessment measures that I use throughout the semester, including weekly reflective papers, four clinical videotapes, a mock diagnosis assignment, and a mock treatment plan assignment. Throughout these assessment measures, students consistently note that the problem-based learning activity best promoted their learning regarding case conceptualization, diagnostic decision-making, and implementing evidence-based treatment modalities (Lee, 2014).

References:

Organization:
The session will be conducted akin to a "flipped classroom" format, with basic information given as handouts and the bulk of the presentation focused on actually working in small groups on a problem-based activity and processing challenges and barriers to this approach. We will have time for brainstorming at the end of the session for participants to consider how they might use a PBL approach in their classes (Prince, 2004).

Keywords:
Collaborative Learning
Learner/Student Centered
Problem-Based Learning