Reflection Paper: Problem Based Learning

History of Problem Based Learning

Problem-Based Learning or PBL is an instructional strategy that allows students to learn to how to learn through collaboration and working cooperatively in groups. Problem-Based learning was first introduced in the medical field. To be more specific this instructional method was pioneered and developed at the medical school in McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario Canada in the 1970’s. "Thomas Corts, president of Samford University, sees PBL as "a newly recovered style of learning" In his view, it embraces the question-and-answer dialectical approach associated with Socrates as well as the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic. As John Cavanaugh puts it: "It’s like discovery-based learning in the 1960s. We knew about it; we didn't do it. Dewey talked about it when he talked about 'engagement.' Dewey had it right on the abstract level. We do the details better now, that's all, and that’s because of advances in cognitive science and in technology" (Rhem, 1998, p.1).

After the 1970’s the problem-based instructional method was practiced and developed more in the medical field. And this made sense. Doctors and nurse are, by the nature of their profession, bombarded with health related problems on a daily basis. They are required to then offer diagnoses as well as solutions to those problems by referring to their repertoire of knowledge which they may have accumulated. Because the medical profession is an application based field where professionals have to function under great constraints, the problem-based learning methodology was able to simulate situations and circumstances under which these professionals would eventually find themselves working in.

What is Problem-Based Learning?

As the name suggests, problem-based learning helps students learn and gain knowledge through the process of deciphering solutions to a given problem. The learning occurs through contextualized real–world problems that students are supposed to work through. The problems should be able to simulate as closely as possible a real-life situation.

The key to problem-based learning is working and collaborating in groups. This strategy enables students learn how to collaborate yet as the same time be able to make meaning independently and be able to communicate in order to gain consensus on a proposed solution. Therefore, problem-based learning not only enables students to learn educational
content by placing the content within their own realm of experience but also impart valuable lessons on social skills and communication.

“But where does it fit compared with all the other "learnings" faculty hear about--cooperative learning," "collaborative learning," and "active learning"? The proliferation of "learnings" and their attendant partisan camps invites the reawakening of long-standing faculty prejudice against educational fads and "methods." Even so, interest in PBL grows because not only does research show a higher quality of learning (though not a greater amount if "amount" equates with the number of facts), but problem-based learning simply feels right intuitively" (Rhem, 1998, p. 2).

The role of the teacher is also altered in this instructional approach. The teacher is no longer the sage-on-the-stage, being the sole owner of knowledge and skills and therefore with the responsibility of ensuring that all the knowledge and skills are then successfully passed on to his/her students. Instead, the teacher now becomes the guide-on-the-side, helping students facilitate and navigated their learning challenges that they encounter when cracking the problem they have been faced with.

**Advantages of Problem-Based Learning**

There are several advantages to using problem-based learning in classrooms. As Norma and Schmidt (1992) note:

- Enhances self-directed learning skills
- Over a extended period of exposure to problem-based learning strategies, student get better at learning and recalling information
- Better able to integrate theory to practice—make the transition more effectively and seamlessly
- Enhances intrinsic interest in the subject matter

**Disadvantages of Problem-Based Learning**

According to Donner and Bickley (1993) problem-based learning also has its disadvantages. Some of the disadvantages are listed below:

- A PBL curriculum is cost heavy
- High faculty workload
- Variable tutor quality: not all facilitators or tutors will have the ability to encourage students to discover knowledge instead of simply giving them the facts
Applying Problem-Based Learning to Policy Analysis

Learning about policy analysis is extremely theoretical. Having envisioned myself teaching policy analysis and implementation classes in the future, I am haunted by the idea that perhaps the classes I teach will also end up being as mind-numbing as the classes that I have been taking. The subject of policy analysis is extremely interesting because it is embedded in our cultural and our social structures. Each policy that is drafted and made into a law tells the story of its people, their history, and their culture. Unfortunately, this particular aspect of policy analysis has never been highlighted in the classes that I have taken thus far. I have noticed that we focus a lot on the theoretical underpinnings of the policy analysis and implementation and forget about the context within which the policy embedded.

My goal, when I start teaching classes on policy analysis and implementation, will be to highlight this very aspect of the subject that I have mentioned above. And I believe that I can reasonably get close to that if I use the problem-based learning instructional method. Of course, there is no telling whether or not it is going to be effective until I truly try it out; however, I can work towards outlining a rough plan of how I intend to achieve my goals.

For a class on policy analysis, I will begin by breaking the class into groups of 4 students each and assigning a real policy problem. Because Policy is extremely extensive, I will take one particular policy, say for example, the NCLB Act and assign the different components of the NCLB Act to each group. For instance group 1 will be asked to analyze the technology component of the NCLB Act whereas group 2 will be asked to analyze the Title 1 funds allocation section of it. Additionally, group 3 can be asked to analyze the addition to the NCLB Act made when the Obama administration took over. The groups will be given information regarding all the theoretical perspectives related to policy analysis to refer to when the need arises. My role as the facilitator and teacher of that class will be to monitor and guide students towards applying the various resources they have available to them.

One of the guiding factors of problem-based learning is that students create their own objectives. Unfortunately, this aspect of PBL, I believe will not be conducive to the class that I will be teaching because the objectives that the students come up with may not be in line with the objectives of the class. Therefore, I will outline for the students the overarching goals that they have to achieve when analyzing the policy. In other words, I will elaborate of what aspects they have to reflect and comment on in order to be able to analyze a particular policy mandate successfully.

If I get to teach a class which teaches students how to draft policy, I will begin by giving them a real world problem such as the issue of controlling the levels of CO2 emissions in a particular town or city. Again, they will be provided with all the resources required for
scaffolding their learning. The objects, as well be made clear, as in the ultimate goal would be to draft a policy which can then be legislated to become an Act.

In my Policy implementation class, I will follow the same approach and give them sections of an existing policy and their goal will be to draft an actual implementation plan for that particular policy mandate.

Following a problem-based learning approach in my class will enable me to guide the students learning towards realizing that policy is not some government document that is drafted in the offices of bureaucrats. They will be able to realize that the role of individuals who eventually get affected by the policy mandates need to be taken into consideration.

I also realize that implementing this instructional strategy in my class will be challenging as it will require me to invest a lot of my time in student interactions. It is much too easy to stand in front of a class and lecture away with the help of textbooks and then simply test whether or not they have mastered the content through midterms and finals. However, this approach does not guarantee if the students have truly learned and internalized the content. The problem-based learning method will allow for the students to reach that level of learning because they will be immersed in solving real-world problems. Surely, the instructional method is labor- as well as resource-intensive, but the results are much more desirable than the cost that we may have to pay.

Reference

