Post-Metamorphosis analysis of a family law module using Problem Based Learning (PBL)

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Introduction

PBL was introduced as the teaching and learning strategy in 2012/13 as a result of issues with attendance, engagement and feedback from local law firms, which highlighted key skills graduates needed to possess. A scoping study carried out in 2011/12 highlighted PBL can more effectively engage a student in the learning process, while enhancing and developing a wider range of skills compared to traditional teaching methods.

The metamorphosis explained

Conventional learning to PBL = Metamorphosis = engagement & enhanced skills

- 2011/12 conventional weekly lectures & seminars
- Conventional learning = Knowledge > problem > solution.
- 2012/13 PBL reverses conventional learning process.
- PBL = Problem > knowledge > solution.
- Problems drive the learning not knowledge.
- PBL is: ‘...active teaching ... allows students to question, speculate & generate own reasoned solutions. Starting point for learning ... a problem the learner wishes to solve.’ (Boud 1999)

The 4 Aims of PBL (Sadlo, modified)

- to advance knowledge & understanding, promoting deeper learning
- to develop critical reasoning skills for reasoned decision making
- to gain self-directed learning skills (for life-long learning)
- to acquire team/group working skills (Sadlo).

Methodology

The following were used to evaluate the use of PBL as a teaching and learning strategy:
1. Questionnaire (91% response rate)
2. Student feedback during reflection sessions.
3. Informal discussions.
4. Tutor observations.

How would you rate your PBL experience?
41% excellent
35% very good
24% satisfactory

As a method of teaching & learning; 61% preferred PBL to traditional lectures and seminars
21% had no preference and 17% preferred lectures

Did you feel supported during the PBL process and suggestions to enhance the student PBL experience?
55% ‘always’ felt supported & 45% felt supported ‘most of the time’

Early trends and conclusions

- Confident, independent learners evidencing deeper learning.
- 100% developed and enhanced range of employability skills.
- PBL can be used to evidence skill development during recruitment.
- Other modules - ability to critically evaluate the law & understand context for legal principles.
- Students attending & preparing medicinally, highly successful (significant majority).
- Learning was not cumulative or contextual for non-attenders and non-contributors. Results confirmed this (minority).
- PBL not for everyone, some unwilling to develop skills required for being a successful independent learner and negatively challenges.
- Minority seeking to be told right answer highlighted possible concerns regarding student understanding of what learning is and assessment.
- Ground rules & reflection sessions need to be used effectively to enhance group & individual performances.

Highlights from findings

- Based on experience; 72% ‘would recommend PBL’ 28% ‘would possibly recommend’ PBL

Based on experience;

- Tutor observations
  - Group work
    - Critical evaluation
    - Dealing with difficult people
  - Wider research sources
  - Problem solving skills
  - Highlight relevant information
  - Confidence in sharing ideas
  - Listening to others

- Group discussion contributors
  - Management & time management skills
  - Public speaking skills
  - Leadership skills
  - Research skills

- Confident group discussion contributor

- Non-attenders/non-contributors

Recommendations for 2013/14

- Encourage & empower groups to use ground rules
- Smaller groups
- Shorter scenarios to build confidence
- Demonstrate role of chairscribe so students can observe first
- Set up a discussion board & promote use
- Make better use of reflection process
- Consider balance of pure PBL & keeping all students supported