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

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Introduction

Family law is a popular final year elective but despite student interest, preparation for seminars can vary and attendance at lectures is not consistent. In 2011, feedback from local law firms highlighted key skills graduates should possess. These include: analytical and deductive skills, the ability to present, work in a team, conduct independent research and negotiate. This scoping study demonstrates how problem based learning (PBL) engages students and enhances employability skills. It also considers the practicability of introducing PBL, the design of PBL materials, how to run PBL sessions and the challenges of using PBL.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to systematically plan for the introduction of PBL in 2012/13. The study follows 4 distinct phases and was informed by the premise of PBL: “What knowledge don’t I know about PBL, that I need to know, to use it effectively?”

Literature review

- Educational rationale
- Law schools experience of using PBL

Visit to York Law School

- PBL 70% of degree
- Interviews with key teaching staff & students
- Observations of PBL in action

Colleagues

- Resources
- Implications
- Perception
- Experience
- Constructive alignment
- Student skill development

PBL World Expert

- Theory of PBL
- PBL in action
- Designing materials
- Running sessions
- Ground rules
- Challenges
- Assessment

Findings: Metamorphosis of the module – shows current teaching strategy and student-centred PBL to be introduced in 2012/13, highlights differences and considerations

STAGE 1

Redesign of module

Current teaching and learning strategy based on traditional method of law school teaching (McKinnon 2006).

Lectures – starting point for learning, transmission of knowledge, passive interaction. Seminars – discussion/problem solving questions, students apply knowledge gained in lecture/reading.

Knowledge > problem > solution (conventional)

STAGE 2

Philosophy of PBL

‘An active teaching method that allows students to question, speculate & generate own reasoned solutions.’ ‘Starting point for learning should be a problem the learner wishes to solve. The problem is the motivation for and focus of the learning.’ (Boud 1999)

What is PBL?

PBL starts with a problem. Traditional learning process is reversed. Content through skills development. Learning is cumulative, contextual, integrated.

Problem > knowledge > solution (PBL)

STAGE 3

Introducing PBL – what to consider?

- Design of problem scenarios, content & teaching outlines
- Ground rules for student engagement (Sadlo)
- Creating a supportive educational environment
- Student guidance; PBL on a page/PBL 7 steps
- Learning resources; IT, library, block guide (York)
- Tutors – may need to enhance facilitation skills
- Pilot sessions using PBL techniques 2011/12 successful!

Continuing development

Monitor and evaluate progress of new PBL teaching & learning strategy.

Regular reviews to ensure module learning outcomes are met

Feedback sessions with students

Use feedback to inform development of teaching materials & module

The Seven Stages of the PBL Process (York)

1. Gather key information and clarify unclear terms and concepts
2. Define the problem
3. Analyse the problem
4. Arrange ideas systematically and consider them in-depth
5. Identify the learning outcomes
6. Self-directed study use range of resources to meet learning outcomes
7. Share the results of your self-directed study with the group

Summary

Benefits of PBL

- Can be introduced at any point in a degree programme: a supportive educational environment is essential to ensure success.
- Can be used as a basis for learning, exam preparation and research. Assessment methods do not need to be changed.
- Can be used to ensure learning outcomes and assessment are constructively aligned.

Challenges of PBL

- Resource hungry and initially time consuming to prepare materials.
- Issues can arise regarding student participation. The PBL process and working effectively as a group can successfully manage these challenges.
- Workload can be greater than other modules, however the students recognise the benefits to be gained as PBL equips them with a wider set of skills.

Students agree ground rules

- Freedom to express ideas - non-judgemental
- Participation rates - skill, not too quiet or dominating
- 100% attendance, fairness, sharing in learning, send apologies
- Do individual learning between sessions
- Reflect at the end of each problem on members contributions
- Prepare hand outs to share

Questions:

- How do you decide what questions to use?
- How do you ensure there is a blend of questions?
- How do you ensure participation?
- How do you ensure fairness?
- How do you ensure sharing in learning?
- How do you ensure all students are accounted for?
- How do you prepare students for such a process?
- How do you prepare students for self-assessment?
- How do you prepare students for peer assessment?
- How do you ensure the learning is relevant to the profession?
- How do you ensure the learning is meaningful to the students?
- How do you ensure the learning is reflected in the assessments?
- How do you ensure the learning is aligned with the module aims and learning outcomes?
- How do you ensure the learning is aligned with the professional standards?
- How do you ensure the learning is aligned with the employer needs?
- How do you ensure the learning is aligned with the student needs?