

Problem Based Learning A Student's Perspective

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PBL is a student oriented; faculty facilitated instructional innovation in medical education, first adopted by McMaster university in the mid 1960s. It is an instructional strategy characterized by the use of patient problems as a context for students to learn problem solving skills and acquire knowledge about the basic and clinical skills.

When I first joined Ziauddin Medical University in December 98, I was as enthusiastic as any new medical student and was determined to achieve my goals in life. In the beginning, I used to devour all the knowledge that teachers used to provide me during the lectures. It was not until the third week that we were exposed to PBL sessions. At first it was a bit frustrating because we were expected to go through a period of adjustment, it took around six months for me to become familiar with the fact that I was suddenly responsible for the learning process. One of the major drawbacks of conventional education is that we are supposed to know what the teachers want us to know, or in other words it is a teacher oriented curriculum, with my thoughts oriented according to my teacher's wish. My teachers have gone through the same process, agreed, but that actually paralyzed my view to look at things the way they were. In PBL, sessions students are the ones who sort out their problems and teachers are mere facilitators. This is quite contrary to learning situations where the teacher teaches and the students, listen. It would be ideal if they were both actively involved in the learning process. I struggle with problems. discuss and try to gain a productive perspective on the subject by searching for and studying relevant material. The teacher participates by asking question, making suggestions and what is more important by being silent at the right moment.

When I started my ward rounds and OPDs it was only then I was able to recognize the true essence of PBL. I knew about great many syndromes and all those fancy tests but how a patient presents to me is a completely different story. In PBL sessions, we come across these real life situations and gradually the horizon of my thoughts increased to a level where I was able to understand a situation in a completely different way and to act accordingly.

Another positive change that PBL bought in my studies was to correlate different phenomena, that is to be able to correlate different aspects of medicine in an integrated manner. Over the course of time, I also learned to use different resources because group discussions generated many small questions that are generally overlooked in conventional teaching methods. To clear these concepts I not only consult textbooks and internet but I have discussions with consultants and professors. This has helped me a great deal, because things are not as simple as they seem and even a simple mistake can potentially become a matter of life and death.

Over the years PBL has taught me to cope up with different people and to interact with my colleagues on an individual basis. This might sound simple but has tremendous implications in my practical life because each day I face a completely different situation for e.g. a patient is not always as compliant as I expect him to be. In these situations, I have to modify my strategy accordingly and this helps a great deal. One of the quite well known problems for medical students is to retain tremendous amounts of knowledge: this at times becomes impossible. I have also faced the same problem. but it is my experience that once I search for a topic on my own it is like becoming an 'expert' on the topic. In addition to that, a clinical association in a PBL. stimulates active learning and improves long-term retention of facts. Above all PBL has made me confident enough to withstand criticism, it is quite interesting to have my colleagues critically evaluate my concepts.

Briefly, PBL, if applied in its proper context is a revolutionary method of student oriented teaching and it is my personal opinion that keeping a student away from potential advantages that PBL offers, can certainly affect their careers on a long-term basis.