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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue: Problem-based learning (PBL) and Psychology

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Welcome to the PLAT special issue on problem-based learning (PBL) and psychology. The aims of this special issue are twofold: 1) to inspire the further use of PBL in psychology higher education teaching and 2) to call for a greater application of psychological research to PBL teaching practice. As a small group of academics, we came together through a collective interest in this area. As tutors, we have seen first-hand the value of PBL in psychology classrooms, of the benefits it can bring to student engagement, learning outcomes and employability. As researchers, we have also seen the potential of psychological approaches for PBL research; there are few other learning approaches that rely so heavily on student interaction and group dynamics. Psychology as a broad and vibrant discipline has much to offer PBL as a learning approach.

At a time of change in the Higher Education landscape, with growing numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds and an increasing marketisation of university education, there is a move toward greater emphasis on skills development and employability. Students are more likely to perceive their psychology degree as preparation for dealing with real world problems in a range of situations rather than the acquisition of a body of academic knowledge, which is, in any case, rapidly changing. PBL originated in the context of medical education based on the need for flexible knowledge applicable to a wide range of situations combined with an ability to search for and select appropriate information. It is therefore timely to consider how teaching and learning in Psychology can benefit from pedagogical approaches aimed at developing independent and critical thinking and particularly how self-directed learning in a social context can support the development of a wide range of graduate skills.

The special issue comprises five papers: one review of PBL and psychology teaching practice, three research articles demonstrating the application of psychology approaches to PBL issues, and one report illustrating the use of online PBL as understood through the lens of a psychological theory. Most of these papers
focus on the issue of group work - with how it is understood by students or how group work plays out in practice in PBL settings - which is arguably one of the aspects of PBL that is often a concern to students and tutors. Indeed, one could argue that group work is a common concern for other learning approaches too. In PBL, however, this is the primary vehicle for learning. Both the Christensen and Hendry et al papers, for example, deal with the delicate issue of how students engage with their fellow group members; with how the ‘us’ of the group is managed in order to learn effectively.

The first paper was written by ourselves and draws together many of the ideas and concerns that provided the motivation for this special issue, and as such offers an opening point from which the rest of the papers can be contextualised. It begins with a definition of PBL in its various forms, and particularly notes the different ways in which PBL can be adopted within a psychology teaching curriculum. This is a crucial point: as long as the core principles of PBL are maintained, it can be adapted to fit different institutional and curriculum requirements. The paper reviews all published accounts of how PBL has been used in psychology higher education, to illustrate the different areas of psychology teaching that have been adapted and to provide concrete examples of PBL practice that can be used to stimulate new developments. The paper concludes with an illustration of the ways in which psychology research could be applied to issues that concern PBL tutors and students, such as how we might measure the processes (rather than outcomes) of learning, including the process of encouraging students to become self-directed learners, and how we can better understand (and facilitate) student interaction in PBL tutorial groups.

The second paper, by Rosander and Hammar Chiriac, examines the heart of PBL teaching: the student tutorial group. The paper addresses how students view the purpose of the tutorial group in PBL, and how they emphasise reasons both in terms of social influence and as a platform for learning. The importance of a tutorial group as a well-functioning learning environment requires that both the group as an objective and as a means are problematised. To be able to use a tutorial group as a means to achieve academic knowledge, and social influence, in terms of social support, togetherness and inspiration, is important for the students. There is a need to focus on more than just academic knowledge in a tutorial group, such as group knowledge and social influence.

The third paper, by Christensen, examines the issue of group work using the lens of Foucault and social constructionism to question the status of group work as a ‘valuable’ approach. By unpacking the often taken-for-granted assumption that group work is an inclusive method of working, Christensen demonstrates that it can actually lead to exclusionary practices. If the value of the group is assumed as a given, then problems with group work will be attributed to individual students, who may themselves be labelled as problematic (lazy, stupid, dominant or anti-social, for example).
The fourth paper by Hendry, Wiggins and Anderson focuses on the thorny issue of ‘group cohesion’, which has previously been identified in the literature as being essential for effective group work. If a group is cohesive, they are more likely to work well together. This paper argues, however, that an interactional perspective could provide important insights into how we understand group cohesion, as being a process or activity, rather than a characteristic of a group. Using examples from video-recorded PBL student tutorials, the paper demonstrates how students discursively construct ‘the group’ as a unit through comparison with ‘others’; that they aligned as a group through social interaction. Group cohesion, then, could be understood as a process or outcome of group work, rather than a characteristic of the individual group members themselves.

The final paper for the special issue is a report of teaching practice by Chen comparing PBL in an online mode with face-to-face PBL. Chen draws on cognitive load theory in an attempt to understand the cognitive processing demands of the different delivery modes. It is argued that although there are some drawbacks of the additional technological demands imposed by online delivery, there are also some distinct advantages over face-to-face PBL resulting from the way that small group work can be facilitated. The report also addresses the issue of how potential disadvantages might be mitigated in order to facilitate successful online PBL.

In conclusion, the special issue offers examples and inspiration for how psychological research might be used to advance PBL practice - with greater understanding of how students (can or should) work in groups, for example - and with how PBL has the potential to enrich psychology teaching. PBL theory and practice can be developed substantially through the application of psychological research in all its varied sub-discipline areas and methodologies. Our selection of papers here only just begins to scratch the surface, and with a leaning toward group work issues in particular. There is much more about PBL that could be advanced with assistance from psychological research: from theories of learning, skills and knowledge development to the social interaction and collaboration practices with other group members. We look forward to seeing new developments in each of these areas.