

Unit 2: Becoming a PBL learner



Introduction

As problem based learning is a complete shift in the way people learn it is important to understand what is required of you to be a problem based learner.

In problem based learning you are responsible for your own learning, you work as a team and in an uncertain environment which is not easy. Therefore, this unit is concerned with informing you what to expect and what will be required from you as a problem based learner. There main topics we will cover are:

- Lesson 1: Coping with uncertainty and the self-directed learner
- Lesson 2: Active listening
- Lesson 3: Importance of trust and respect
- Lesson 4: Collaborative learning and conflict
- Lesson 5: The importance of reflective learning
- Lesson 6: Systems thinking

In each lesson you may be provided with additional reference material for further reading if you wish to gain more knowledge of the area. There will also be tasks to complete in some lessons to provide you with opportunities to apply what you have learned in the workplace. At the each of the unit there will be an assignment for you to complete which is related to what you have learned.

Lesson 1: Coping with uncertainty and the self-directed learner

Uncertainty is a natural and even necessary part professionalism. As a result, it is important to see problems and conflicts as something positive we can learn from. By sharing problems openly, we can understand them better and can gain support from others.

Learning to cope with uncertainty can be an emotional challenge. Fear is the main reason behind this. Learners can be afraid of becoming misunderstood, rejected or being wrong. It is important to identify what you are unsure of and fear in the PBL process and how you can address these. In addition, openly sharing these concerns with your tutor or peers can diminish uncertainty. See the below example

Example

A member of staff received feedback from a student saying that she felt the tutor had an angry face during the class. This affected the student's ability to participate in the class as she was frightened to be wrong. When the tutor was informed he was surprised and told the student it may have been because they were new to PBL and they found too difficult to concentrate on everyone's comments.

Self-directed learning involves taking responsibility for your own learning. It involves identifying

what you want to learn, gathering the information to help you learn and self-assessment. This can seem very uncertain and ambiguous.

The PBL process will help you to do this. It allows you to select a problem that interests you in your company, it guides you through the process to enable you to gather the relevant information to learn about that problem, reflection allows you to self-assess and reflect of the effectiveness of your approach.

Lucy and Guglielmo (2003) identifies a number of key things that can help you become self-directed

- 1) Organise your learning, plan what you want to achieve (develop learning objectives) and break these it into smaller, manageable chunks.
- 2) Consult with your peers and others
- 3) Identify what way you prefer to learn, read text, view videos,
- 4) Apply a solution and evaluate what happens.

Video resource: Self-directed learning in the workplace

[Self directed learning in the workplace](#)

Supplementary reading: Becoming a self-directed learner

[Self directed learner](#)

Lesson 2: Active listening

Listening is a simplistic skill that most people feel that they are good at however this is not the case, the majority of the time we are busy developing a response to the person rather than listening to them. Please see the below supplementary video resource to learn about this:

Supplementary Video Resource: Active Listening

[Listening](#)

Often in collaborative and team learning discussions can go off track and time can be wasted on unimportant items. In PBL you should practice active learning and build on others people's comments. Following the principles that guide accountable conversations allows you to focus on the discussion and build on what others have said.¹

- accountability to the learning community: ' People should listen to each other with an intent to build on each other's ideas. If others don't understand what was mentioned they clarify this with the speaker.
- accountability to standards of reasoning: the talk should "emphasise logical connections and the drawing of reasonable conclusions"

¹ http://www.robinaalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/UKLA-http-authorservices.wiley_.com-bauthor-onlineLibraryTPS.asp_DOI10.1111-j.1741-4369.2010.00562.xArticleID7470671.pdf

- accountability to knowledge: the talk should be “based explicitly on facts, written texts or other . . . information that all . . . can access. Speakers make an effort to get their facts right and make explicit the evidence behind their claims and expectations. They challenge each other when evidence is lacking or unavailable” This is done in a respectful manner. (Michaels et al., 2008, p. 283)

Lesson 3: Importance of trust and respect

To encourage collaboration people must be trusted and trust each other. Trust is key to problem based learning and uncertainty can arise due to a lack of trust. To ensure trust in a learning environment the learners must respect each other’s opinions, communicate with each other and build relationships. The tutor will place a significant amount of trust in you as a learner to be responsible for your own learning. However, you need to build trust with your peers to create positive learning environment for PBL. This entails:

1. Tolerate mistakes as part of learning
2. Respect each other
3. Identify that asking for help is not a failure
4. Build relationships
5. Have open communication

1) Tolerate mistakes as part of learning. If there is an environment in which there is a fear of failure people will be slow to participate and try new ideas. Therefore, you and others must be open to discussing mistakes or issues in your work practices and learning from them. Mistakes are an inevitable part of learning and are acceptable as long as you have a strong rationale for making these mistakes. Reflective learning will encourage you to reflect on what decisions you made and why to allow you to articulate this.

It must be emphasised in PBL **any suggestions for changes and improvements or work issues that are highlighted are not criticism but opportunities. It is important that rather than criticising people, all learners should be encouraged to look at mistakes from the perspective of work practices.**

An example of an effort to tolerate mistakes is identified by Prof Amy Edmonson. The initiative is known as 'Blame free reporting' which allows employees to report any observation of mistakes or practices that might not be going well free from penalty or blame (see Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business school)

Supplementary Video Resource
[Blame free reporting](#)

Respect each other. As collaboration is key to successful PBL it is important that each learner treats others with respect, this will involve listening to people’s views even if you do not agree. It is important to be empathetic towards your peers and understanding where they are coming from. Rather than jumping to conclusions and to observe, understand and listen to other people, this will be developed through active listening. Please view the below video source to find out about how the ladder of inference can cause people to jump to conclusions

Supplementary Video Resource

[The ladder of inference](#)

Highlight that asking for help is not a failure. We all have different strengths, work at various speeds and need support in different ways. It is important that everyone should look for ways to help each other and seek help. However, care must be taken so that others do not exploit this. Staff are ultimately responsible for the completion of their own work however in exceptions where staff are burdened with a large workload an effort will be made to assist this.

Build relationships. Often in their professional role individuals behave very differently than they do socially. In addition, everyone has personal circumstances and responsibilities that as working colleges we may not be aware of. To build relationships it is important to have a personal element to work. Have a regular scheduled coffee morning or staff night out to get to know peoples on a personal level.

Open communication Sharing ideas and experiences is key to PBL success. In addition, it is important that you communicate to your peers any concerns or issues you may be experiencing. Others may be in the same situation.

Lesson 4: How to learn collaboratively

Problem based learning is collaborative by nature and will require several individuals to work together during the process

Learning is a social process and many learning theorists have emphasised this. Without interaction with a mentor, peer or others our learning is limited. A learner might read a history book and learn a sequence of events such as that which occurred during the second world war however by speaking to survivors and people who experienced life during the war they will get an insight into everyday life and how people were impacted.

There is more than one perspective on a situation. For example, you might have a particular way of doing your job that you think is efficient. However, you might go to your colleague to speak to them about a work issue and notice they have a different way of doing things. You ask them why they do it in this way and learn that it saves more time. You decide to adopt this way of doing the process.

There are many advantages of working in a group

- Division of labour – you can divide up tasks rather than bearing the workload alone
- Speed – you can get things done quicker
- Expertise – different people bring different experience, ideas and perspectives that would not have been feasible if you were working on your own
- Group ownership – social aspect to work.

However, there is often a negative reaction to group work known as “Group hate” (Sorensen, 1981). This is due to:

- Lack of effort – some people not ‘pulling their weight’
- Withholding information – some people keep information to themselves
- Conflict between personalities or work agenda
- People become scapegoats - one person is singled out as bearing the responsibility

Group hate is often due to conflict. In team work and collaboration there is going to be times when conflicts arise. This section deals with approaches to aiding the resolution of conflicts that may

arise. Note this material is taken from the below source²

When working in a Learning Team, the objective is to resolve conflicts in a win-win manner, rather than a win-lose. If one or more team members take a win-lose approach to resolving conflict, the team as a whole will suffer, and the real result will be lose-lose.

Managing conflict and resolving conflicts are two distinct processes. Before conflict can be managed, it must be understood. One approach to conflict analysis and resolution is known as the 4Rs Method, according to Engleberg et al (2003). This method has four steps, each of which is summarized with a word beginning with the letter "R":

- **Reasons.** In this step, the causes or reasons for the conflict are explored and openly, yet respectfully, discussed.
- **Reactions.** In this step, team members look at their own reactions to the conflict. If those reactions are destructive, rather than constructive, individuals can self-correct and take the necessary steps to recommit to team success.
- **Results.** If the conflict is not resolved, what might happen? How might the team work together to resolve the conflict in a constructive manner?
- **Resolution.** Which approach to conflict resolution could be used to effectively resolve the conflict?

Once the team understands the conflict, it can then choose an appropriate approach to resolve it. Ralph H. Kilmann and Kenneth W. Thomas, authors of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, have identified five general approaches to dealing with conflict:

- 1) Avoidance.
- 2) Accommodation.
- 3) Competition.
- 4) Compromise.
- 5) Collaboration.

Conflict resolution is situational and no one approach provides the best or one right approach for all circumstances (Thomas, 2002). There are, however, general guidelines which can be used to decide which of these approaches will be most effective in certain situations.

Avoidance

Although avoiding or denying the existence of a conflict usually does not cause the dispute to go away, there are times when avoidance is appropriate in the team situation. If the conflict itself is not central to the work of the team, it may be best to set it aside so that the important work of the team can proceed. When the situation gets out of control and emotions are running high, avoidance is sometimes the best approach as well. In these situations, it is best to reschedule the team meeting so that people can collect their thoughts, approach the situation more calmly, and have time to put the conflict in perspective.

Accommodation

When the accommodation approach is used, one person gives in to another for the sake of getting along. This may be an appropriate approach when the person accommodating does not view the matter as important, or when it is more important that the group experience cohesiveness or harmony than for an individual perspective on the topic to prevail. Before becoming an accommodator, however, the individual team member must be certain he or she can live with the decision and will not later regret having made it.

² www.apollolibrary.com/library/ltr/download/managingconflict.pdf

Competition

In a nutshell, competition may best be described as a win-lose style of conflict resolution. That is, one team member may feel so importantly about the topic that he or she needs to aggressively pursue his or her perspective in hopes of persuading other team members to view the situation in the same manner. This approach is appropriate when a team member believes alternatives being explored are not practical, ethical, or legal.

Compromise

Generally, when people compromise it is to accept a middle ground position, i.e., one in which each person gives up something for the sake of agreement. By definition, a compromise only partially satisfies each person. This approach is often effective when teams have reached an impasse and are running out of time to attempt to resolve the conflict. Sometimes, a compromise is the best solution that can be reached under the circumstances.

Collaboration

In an ideal world rather than compromising, people in dispute would be able to collaborate to find a resolution that satisfies the needs of everyone involved. Collaboration requires creative and cooperative efforts. The primary roadblock to collaboration usually is the amount of time and energy it requires. Collaboration is generally effective when the team has sufficient time to fully explore the needs, perspectives, and preferences of all team members, and when 100% commitment from each person is needed to accomplish team goals.

Conflict Resolution Processes

Before attempting to resolve conflicts, it helps if each person takes some time to think rationally about the conflict and prepare for the discussions. In the book, *Resolving Conflicts on the Job*, authored by Wisinski (1993) the author developed the A-E-I-O-U Model for individual use before engaging in discussions to resolve conflict. Each letter of the model stands for a step, as follows:

A: Assume the other people involved in the conflict mean well

E: Express your own feelings

I: Identify what you would like to see happen

O: Outcome—express the outcome you would like to see while remaining open to another outcome that may satisfy your needs and concerns

U: Understanding—the agreement should be understood, and committed to, by each member of the team (p. 27).

Once each team member understands the conflict and has an idea about what possible solutions will meet the needs of team as a whole, it is time to decide on a process to use to resolve the conflict.

There are three general processes to consider:

- 1) Negotiation.
- 2) Mediation.
- 3) Arbitration.

Negotiation does not require the assistance of anyone outside of the team. Rather, the team members meet together to talk about their individual views on the topic that is at the centre of the conflict; identify what is important to them; propose a solution that meets their needs; listen to what others in the team have to say; and then attempt to reach an agreement. Effective negotiations are conducted in a win-win style and frame of mind. Most Learning Team conflicts are resolved through this informal process.

Mediation is a facilitated process of negotiation. If Learning Team members are not able to negotiate their own resolution, they could ask the mentor/facilitator to assist them with the

discussions. Sometimes, the facilitator member can be used as a behind-the-scenes resource. That is, the facilitator member might be able to help individual team members see the strengths or benefits of the proposals other members are making. The facilitator can share insights about an effective approach to the discussions or about other possible solutions the team has not yet considered. If, however, these behind-the-scenes efforts are not effective, the Learning Team could ask the facilitator member to meet with them in order to discuss the conflict and help them reach a solution. In mediation the facilitator member does not have decision-making power. Rather, he or she is a neutral person who focuses on the process of the discussions and helps the team focus on the issues, rather than personalities and on the future rather than the past. Only when Learning Teams are unable to resolve their own disputes should the facilitator member be asked to assist.

Arbitration is a process for resolving conflict, but is one which is virtually never used as a way to resolve Learning Team conflicts. It is a last resort and way to achieve a decision when the team is at an impasse and is not able or willing to come to agreement on its own. The arbitrator is asked to make a decision for the team. Arbitration is a win-lose approach to conflict resolution. There will be winners and there will be losers, since the arbitrator is asked to decide whose approach or idea is right or best for the team as a whole. Clearly, all members of the Learning Team will need to agree to abide by the arbitrator's decision. Although this is a possible approach to conflict resolution, arbitration is not a practical approach to Learning Team conflicts. It can lead to derision and erode the team morale and cohesiveness.

Supplementary Reading resources

[University of Phoenix: Conflict management in learning teams](#)

[CIPD: Conflict Management at work](#)

Lesson 5: The importance of reflective learning

Reflective learning involves explaining your reasoning for making particular decisions or conducting a particular action. These are your mental models or how you perceive the 'norm'. Often people are not aware of how they do things and do them subconsciously.

Supplementary Video Resource

[Reflective learning](#)

Mental models involve the learner explaining their thought process around making particular decisions or their thought process about how the solution will work and why. It is basically articulating how and why they made a particular decision or implemented a solution in a particular way.

Often in learning it is not the final decision but the approach taken to reach that decision which is the most beneficial. For example, a company might decide to set up a distribution centre in a particular location. The thought process behind how and why they made that decision and implemented it can be applied to another similar instance within the company in the future.

Another example may be if a machine operator has low defect rate and high output due to the

machine settings they choose the benefit is not what machine settings they use but why they choose to set the machine in that way at any given time.

Similarly, for a service environment if an insurance broker has a low churn rate of customers without offering excessive discounts how does this broker interact with existing customers.

Reflection allows the learner to focus on the process by which they reached the decision and whether it was successful or not rather than the end result. It identifies the methodology they use to make decisions, conduct actions and solve problems.

In problem based learning there will be opportunities for reflection at different stages of the process. You will be asked questions about what decisions you made, why and if these were effective or not.

Lesson 6: Systems thinking

Systems thinking involves examining the impact your solution will have on other areas of the organisation.

Supplementary Video Resource

[Systems thinking](#)

"Because we learn best from our experiences but seldom experience the consequences of many of our important decisions, we typically look for actions that will produce solutions in a relatively short time frame³"

All too often in companies, particularly larger organisations staff are concerned with their own work practices. Each department has their own performance metrics to achieve and functions are concerned with reaching these targets. It is important to examine how your work and practices impact other areas of the organisation. It is important that you work as part of a team to understand the impact of your work practices and reach cohesive solution that does not cause problems for other areas.

In addition, when encountering a problem, rather than trying to immediately identify a solution it is important to spend time understanding why these problems come about.

Example

A sales department might have a target to achieve a certain number of customers, to do this they might promise the customer a number of new product features, additional warranties and discounting however this may not be feasible from a production or financial perspective.

Task 1: Uncertainty

- List the main concerns you have about doing Problem based learning
- Why do you think you have these concerns?
- What will you do to minimise these concerns

Task 2: Collaboration and dealing with conflict

- For this task you are required to think of a situation in which you were in that conflict arose
- How did you deal with this conflict at the time? How would you address the conflict if you were faced with the same situation again?

Task 3: Reflection and mental models

- Think of a process you conduct on a daily basis. Write down how you do this process. What problems do you experience in the process, why do these problems arise and how do you address them?