

PBL - Problem Based Learning for Companies and Clusters

Ileana Hamburg

Institut Arbeit und Technik

WH Gelsenkirchen, Munscheidstr. 14

D-45886 Gelsenkirchen

0049/002091707265

hamburg@iat.eu

Gabriel Vladut

IPA-SA Craiova

Str. Stefan cel Mare, 12, 200130,

Craiova, Dolj, Romania

0040/251 418 882

office@ipacv.ro

Abstract:

Small and medium sized companies (SMEs) assure economic growth in Europe. Generally many SMEs are struggling to survive in an ongoing global recession and often they are becoming reluctant to release or pay for staff training. In this paper we present shortly the learning methods in SMEs particularly the Problem Based Learning (PBL) as an efficient form for SMEs and entrepreneurship education.

In the field of Urban Logistics it was developed four Clusters with potential of innovation and research in four European Regions: Tuscany - Italy, Valencia - Spain, Lisbon and Tagus - Portugal, Oltenia – Romania. Training and mentoring for SMEs, are essential to create competitiveness. Information and communication technologies (ICT) support the tutors by using an ICT platform which is in the development.

Keywords

SME, e-Learning, PBL, ICT. Clusters, Joint Action Plan.

1. LEARNING IN SMEs

Small and medium sized companies (SMEs) assure economic growth in Europe [8]. The financial crisis and the economic recession have hit SMEs hard in the Europe 28 (EU28) and the economic conditions remain difficult. Many of these companies are micro enterprises, having few resources and difficulties in facing technological, economic and financial changes.

Cluster research and development for urban logistics by means of smart specialisation strategies and creation of competitive niches - Joint Action Plan development and implementation.

Putting together companies and research institutions belonging to the Clusters on middle-long term objectives, for planning the development of the skills and qualification of their personnel is an effective way for creating permanent links between the research and the industrial environment. This attitude has several beneficial effects:

- Pushes industrial companies to link technological and market development to human resources qualification with a foresight of future trends.
- Can fill the cultural gap between industrial companies and R&D entities, creating osmosis between these two worlds.
- Stimulates companies to overcome the short-term vision of immediate interest and to cooperate with other companies on more ambitious targets

Referring learning, the most popular form of learning in SMEs is the informal one, which accounts for over 75% of the learning taking place in organizations today. Informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way

people learn to do their jobs. Most learning does not occur during formal training programmes. It happens through processes that are not structured or supported by an employer or an organized formal course. [2], [9]. Most companies, however, focus on and recognize only formal learning programs, losing valuable opportunities and outcomes.

Blended learning can combine the positive aspects of different learning approaches, classroom-based learning and e-Learning, formal and informal ones [6], [13]. By mixing learning styles and different dimensions of learning suitable for SMEs at the course level the usage of blended learning opportunities as a suitable way to learn in SMEs could be improved and so this increases or keeps up competitiveness/surviving of the companies.

The term blended learning is used in the literature for a combination of traditional off-line methods of learning with online methods (i.e. web-based ones) [12]. Within blended learning, classroom based learning is combined with computer-mediated instructions [10], [11], but also various event-based activities (face-to-face class rooms, live e-Learning, self-paced learning) are combined.

Important aspects of SMEs blended learning could be self-paced learning, mix of methods and media, quality, time flexibility, learner-centered, motivation, flexibility, accessibility and workplace-related learning.

The trainees have the possibility to choose when they study, distance and schedules becoming irrelevant. The students are not required to take into account each other's time restrictions, can also choose content necessary to their tasks. In some projects like SIMPEL [4], the use of e-learning in SMEs has particularly analyzed. The conclusions were that *properly developed training based on e-Learning not only contributes to improve competences of SME staff, but also to create a growing repository of knowledge.*

This knowledge can be continuously provided to employees at a determined time. E-Learning has a great potential for the expansion of educational opportunities but it is to consider that "social presence is a strong enabler of satisfaction also in a computer conference" [13].

Results of projects show that SMEs are restricted in the efficient use of different forms of learning and ICT for learning and in adequate management learning approaches [4]. In the following we present the *Problem Based Learning (PBL) as an efficient form for SMEs and entrepreneurship education and its ICT support* [1], [12].

PBL should be adopted outside academic contexts i.e. as an excellent method of training for SMEs. It allows the learner to develop skills relevant to the needs of the company, it is conducted in a work based environment, it provides them with the skills to sustain the company beyond the initial training, it is low cost and it directly

solves problems for the SME providing an immediate return [11]. Donnelly [12] highlighted that little is known about the use of technology in PBL.

2. PBL

Problem Based Learning (PBL) is an educational strategy introduced at McMaster University, Canada in 1969 [6]. *PBL strategy uses real problems to motivate staff and students learning.* The PBL rationale is compatible with modern educational principles and approaches which will lead to the achievement of the following objectives [7]:

- 1) Better acquisition and retrieval of Knowledge related to context and integrate many disciplines.
 - 2) Motivate the students, and provide responsibility of learning
 - 3) Develop the ability of self-learning and metacognition
 - 4) Adapt the learning needs of the students
 - 5) Develop the skills
 - 6) Develop interpersonal skills, the ability to work in team
- Many factors are needed in order to achieve a successful PBL that leads to achievement of acquisition of retrieval knowledge. Those factors are:
- 1) Prior knowledge and its activation are very important for achievement and increasing the interest in the subject matter.
 - 2) Well-constructed problem will stimulate discussions and will increase the time spent in the tutorial group and in self-study.
 - 3) Competences and behavior of the tutor that maintains the discussion to the context of the problem
 - 4) Student self determination
 - 5) A well-functioning team
 - 6) Group Dynamics

Educational theory / Element	Application in PBL
Information processing	Students use their prior knowledge to generate learning objectives. The learning regarding the problem will resemble the future situations in which the knowledge acquired will be applied. Students have the opportunity to expand and elaborate their gained knowledge.
Collaborative Learning	The tutorial group gives each student an opportunity to present what he/she finds from different resources during the self-learning process.
Self-determination	The students are motivated during the problem solving process by different factors, both intrinsic.
Control	In PBL, students define the objectives to be achieved, in a certain defined time.
Behaviorism	The problem will stimulate the students to learn (antecedent), students will acquire knowledge (behavior) and students will apply this knowledge to solve the problem (consequence).

Social Cognitive	Learning in PBL is due to interaction between the problem as a stimulus, the needs of the learner, the effectiveness of the tutorial group and the abilities of the student to compile the needed information from different resources and discuss these findings.
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3. TEACHING PBL

Steps which will consider in our projects by teaching PBL and corresponding questions are [12], [13]:

1. Clarifying the task – The purpose of the first step is to explain the task, to agree on the meaning of the various words and terms and on the situation described in the problem. Knowledge possessed by the group members or retrieved from a dictionary can be used

Questions:

- Do you understand words, terms and notions?
- Do you agree on what they mean?

2. defining the problem - The group discuss and reach an agreement on the issues, which need explanation.

Questions:

- What are the problems?
- What are the sub problems?
- Select the problems/sub problems

3. Brainstorming - Aspects on basis of prior knowledge are collected and ideas to structure the problem are expressed. Explanations are arranged into tentative solutions.

4. Rating of Brainstorming outcomes

5. Formulating learning objectives to cover knowledge deficits - Group reaches consensus on the learning objectives; tutor ensures learning objectives are focused, achievable, comprehensive, and appropriate.

Questions

- What do you need to learn before you can solve the case problems?
- Write down the learning goals
- Where can you learn about it?

6. Self-study of the group participants. This phase offers students possibility to acquire a more profound knowledge of theories at the root of the problem. The group members collect information individually with respect of defined learning objectives. Information is collected from the literature but also from other sources (library, journals, internet etc.)

7. Rating of possible solutions and working out a final solution - Group shares results of private study. The tutor checks learning and may assess the group.

8. Reflection and feedback of all participants on the case, the process and the tutor, to improve the learning process. Also it is very important the students validate the course and give their comments on the quality of the problem as well as on the quality of the group process and the tutor's performance

Questions:

- What have you learnt?
- Use it for solving the case problem!

The tutors/trainers of the PBL group play a central role as a facilitator in the PBL process, guiding and supporting the students. The tutor / trainer has to check the understanding, ensure group achieves their learning goals, to encourage asking questions and explaining themselves, to introduce use of diagrams and drawings, to foster clinical reasoning and to provide feedback.

In PBL, students need to take a more active part in the organization of the process than in traditional lectures. Students more or less become each other's teachers.

Referring the most efficient way for PBL to get students to grapple with the subject matter? How can students be held accountable for their work, one of the best methods of teaching will be blended learning.

4. ICT SUPPORT IN PBL

We search to develop a framework for organizational problem-based learning and support the use of this form of learning. It is expected that these approaches will be widely adopted in entrepreneurial education and SMEs. PBL will be supported by an ICT platform taking into consideration the PBL steps described below.

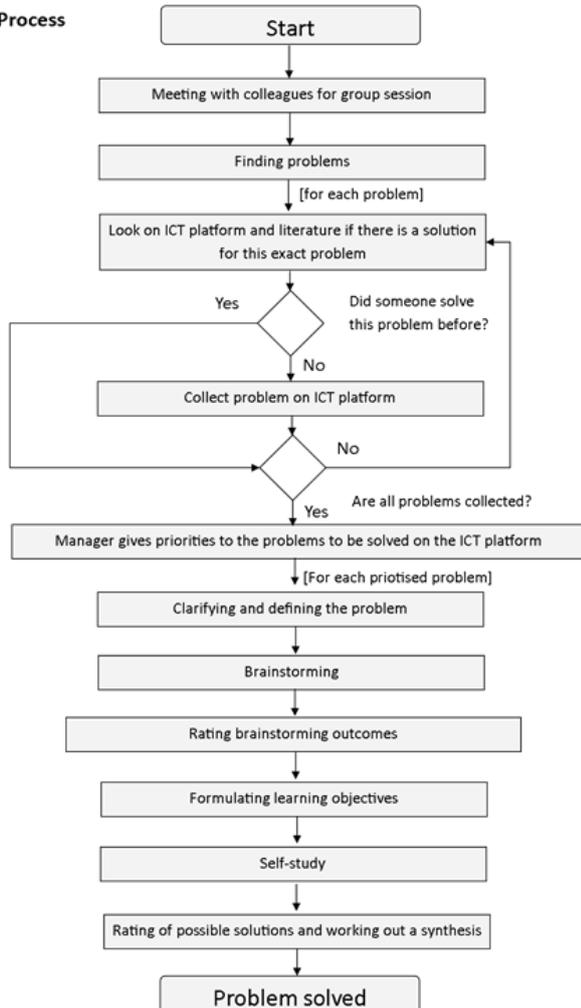


Figure 1. Flow chart of a PBL supporting ICT platform (source IAT)

Step2 - Defining the problem

The problem is that we sold too less printers of the type d4. We wanted to sell 40,000 and only reached 30,000 sold objects. We try to find an improvement of our marketing strategy to increase the amount of sold printers.

Step3 and Step4 - Brainstorming and analysing of possible solutions

Ideas

Idea	Created by	Rating
We invest in advertisement	admin	☆☆☆☆ (1)
We decrease the price of the printer	admin	☆☆☆☆ (1)
We enlarge our customer base	admin	☆☆☆☆ (1)
We observe our competitors	admin	☆☆☆☆ (1)

Enter an idea

Problem name*

Idea*

Created by*

Rating Number of votes: 0, Average: 0

Fields marked with an * are mandatory

Comments

Comment	Created by
We have to take more time to observe the market strategy of our competitors	iliana
I think the best strategy is to invest in advertisement	admin

Figure 2. Problem overview on the ICT platform

The platform is in development by using TikiWiki. TikiWiki, also known as Tiki, is an open source Content Management System (CMS). It provides many rich features like websites, forum, chat, wiki, blogs, quiz, calendar, document management, social software and many more. It is highly configurable and is mainly used in companies to organize tasks and to work collaboratively. Tiki has proven to be a good ICT solution for collaborative working and will be used as platform for PBL. The following figures show screenshots of the ICT platform supporting PBL. *Implementation of PBL requires some changes in the curriculum of entrepreneurship education and trainers / teachers with special knowledge.* Rooms should be available for group discussions and the libraries should contain references which allow students to research for their PBL cases.

HOME FORUM LEARNING MATERIAL

Menu: Home, Wiki, Forums, File Galleries, Trackers, Admin

Problem finding

New problems

Problem name	Short description	Created by	Action
No records found			

Enter a problem

Problem name*

Short description

Created by

Importance Number of votes: 0, Average: 0

Fields marked with an * are mandatory

Problem solving

Pending problems

Problem	Short description	Created by	Importance	Action
Printer sales	Too less printers sold in the last year	admin	☆☆☆☆ (1)	Close Item
Cash flow problem	Some months, there is a shortfall in our income versus expenditure. We find it difficult to get an overdraft from the bank to facilitate us during these months due to lending restrictions.	emmacbrinn	☆☆☆☆ (1)	Close Item

Closed problems

Problem name	Short description	Created by
No records found		

Figure 3. PBL steps visualized on the ICT platform.

Step5 - Formulating learning objectives

Objective	Created by	Action
We have to analyse our competitors	admin	X
We have to calculate if we can save money for advertisement	admin	X

Enter a new learning objective

Problem name *

Objective *

Created by *

Fields marked with an * are mandatory

Step6 - Self-study

Enter a link or upload a file

Problem name *

Link

File(s)

Upload files

Drop files from your desktop here or browse for them

Keine Dateien ausgewählt.

Comment

Created by

Fields marked with an * are mandatory

Step7 - Working out a synthesis

Enter the synthesis here

Figure 4. PBL steps visualized on the ICT platform.

Clusters represent the means to gather innovations and solutions in order to implement smart specialisation on a regional scale. [14]

5. CONCLUSIONS

The paper present the learning methods in SMEs particularly the Problem Based Learning (PBL) as an efficient form for SMEs and entrepreneurship education and its ICT support.

Properly developed training based on e-Learning not only contributes to improve competences of SME staff, but also to create a growing repository of knowledge.

PBL strategy uses real problems to motivate staff and students learning.

The PBL rationale is compatible with modern educational principles and approaches which will lead to the achievement of more objectives that was presented.

Teaching PBL is under some specific steps which were considered in our projects.

In PBL, students need to take a more active part in the organization of the process than in traditional lectures.

PBL can be supported by an ICT platform taking into consideration the PBL steps described.

Implementation of PBL requires some changes in the curriculum of entrepreneurship education and trainers / teachers with special knowledge.

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