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Student perceptions and experiences of problem-based learning in first year undergraduate sports therapy

Sheila Leddington Wright^{a,*}, Michael J. Duncan^a, Maggi Savin-Baden^b

^a Department of Applied Sciences and Health, Coventry University, UK.

^b University of Worcester Henwick Grove, WR2 6AJ, UK



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ABSTRACT

Problem-based learning (PBL) has long been used as a means to foster critical thinking and student autonomy. However, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of PBL in Sports Therapy. The aim of this study was to examine first year Sports Therapy students' perceptions of PBL. Results revealed that students perceived PBL as vocationally relevant, by enabling them to work in and across groups, whilst also engaging with a wider range and depth of information compared to more traditional methods of curriculum delivery. External observations of the lecturers input sessions were made by an impartial researcher. The implications of the study are that PBL appears to be a professionally suitable and appropriate learning modality for Sports Therapy students.

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1. Introduction

The UK [National Student Survey \(2012\)](#) revealed an area in Sports Therapy education which could be improved. This related to coursework not being stimulating, besides some general student comments that there was not enough specific Sports Therapy content in the course. The Sports Therapy programme was up for review in 2013 so an alternative mode to assist student engagement in the course was implemented. Problem-based learning (PBL) is an approach to learning, rather than a teaching method, which is being increasingly promoted and utilised in higher education. It facilitates students' understanding of their own situations and frameworks enabling them to perceive how they learn, and how they see themselves as future professionals ([Savin-Baden, 2006](#)). PBL is 'designed to help students develop competencies that will serve them throughout their professional lives' ([Krishnan, Gabb, & Vale, 2009](#):117) and have 'an apprenticeship for real-life problem-solving' ([Dunlap, 2005](#):1). Sports Therapy is an aspect of healthcare concerned with reducing risk of injuries and rehabilitation of clients to an optimal, functional and occupational fitness level. Sports Therapists are autonomous practitioners, but they can work in multi-disciplinary teams, where sharing ideas is an essential part of professional practice. Therefore, as PBL has been successfully employed in medical therapy education and is currently successfully utilised in Coventry University Sports Science department (where Sports Therapy is taught), but not specifically in the Sports Therapy course, it was decided to use PBL in one of the Sports Therapy modules.

By integrating PBL into the first year of a Sports Therapy course professional practice skills such as communication, team working, leadership and problem-solving could potentially be developed. We argue that these skills were not easily learnt in the traditional methods of teaching, for example through a curriculum that relies heavily on lecture-based delivery with a

* Correspondence to: Department of Applied Science and Health, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5HB, UK.
E-mail address: ssx398@coventry.ac.uk (S. Leddington Wright).

narrow set of defined competencies. Students might benefit considerably more with a PBL approach which supports independent enquiry and promotes real meaning and understanding into the case scenarios. In the context of Sports Therapy, there has been limited investigation on student perceptions and evaluation of PBL (O'Donoghue, McMahonDoody, Smith, & Cusack, 2011). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the PBL module in a first year Sports Therapy undergraduate degree course and to report and evaluate students' perceptions and experience of this module.

2. Literature review

Barrows and Tamblyn (1980) undertook a study into the reasoning of medical students. The findings indicated that they could take a patient history but not apply their knowledge to the patient. The result of this study was the development of PBL; an approach adopted at McMaster University, Canada which marked a clear move away from problem-solving learning in which individual students answered a series of questions from information supplied by a lecturer. In this early version of PBL certain key characteristics were essential. Students in small teams would explore a problem situation and through this exploration were expected to examine the gaps in their own knowledge and skills to resolve or manage the situation with which they were presented. The 'problems', also termed 'scenarios' are central to student learning in each component of the curriculum (modules/units). The lectures, seminars, workshops or laboratories support the inquiry process rather than transmitting subject-based knowledge. To date there has been little in-depth discussion about the design of problem-based curricula. Instead the discussions have tended to centre on what counts as PBL, ways of implementing it and types of PBL (Savin-Baden, 2000, 2007; Savin-Baden & Major, 2004).

PBL was popularised in the 1980s and in many ways resulted in spaces where dialogic learning took place at a time in global higher education when performative practices were on the increase. Today this largely remains the case, but often there is little realisation that there are not only different types and models of PBL but that ebbs and flows of change occur within the PBL community. To date PBL has been seen as a relatively stable approach to learning, delineated by particular characteristics. Interest in the impact of PBL on students was an area of interest for tutors at Maastricht University, Netherlands from the outset. Early studies tested the extent to which PBL helped students with problem-solving. In particular Schmidt (1983) found that by examining the role of prior learning, evaluating students' retrieval of information and exploring the extent to which students were able to elaborate knowledge, it was possible to map the potential qualities of PBL. Later work at Maastricht (Schmidt & Moust, 1995) explored the influence of tutors' behaviour on student achievement. This important study found that effective tutoring for PBL required that tutors had a suitable level of knowledge, a willingness to engage with students in an authentic way and an ability to express themselves in a way understood by students.

As PBL was flourishing at Maastricht, Linköping University was also developing its own approach. Important studies undertaken at Linköping emerged from an interest in exploring the relationship between research and undergraduate education, (Abrandt, Castensson, & Dahlgren, 1995); (more recently termed research-led learning in the UK in 2006). An examination of PBL from the teachers' perspective was one of the early qualitative studies in the field. This study (Abrandt, Castensson, & Dahlgren, 1998) found that whilst tutors valued PBL they experienced conflict about whether their role should have a teaching or learning focus and a supportive or directive function.

There are several blueprints for PBL but relatively little information exists to guide those who want to consider how to use it in terms of actually designing the curriculum in a practical way. Cultural and institutional constraints affect the design of problem-based curricula, as do issues that tend to differ across disciplines, such as the way an essay is constructed or the way that knowledge is seen. However, in this project Savin-Baden's eight *modes of curriculum practice* were drawn on (Appendix 1). These modes are not meant to be an exhaustive list but rather are a means of considering what occurs in some programmes as well as the impact of opting for a particular design.

Curricula where PBL is central to the learning are in fact largely constructivist in nature because students make decisions about what counts as knowledge and knowing. What is problematic here is how such a constructivist stance can be married with benchmarking statements and the emerging audit culture in higher education. In recent years, we have seen such a significant shift towards accountability and transparency that the focus in many curricula is more upon outcomes and less upon learning. For example, if the assumption is that the students must cover a given amount of knowledge in a given time, the focus of the curriculum is likely to be on knowledge acquisition rather than learning. In a programme that is centred on skills acquisition, the focus will be on the way in which knowledge is necessarily useful for practice. When adopting PBL, the extent to which the curriculum is designed as a whole entity is an important concern. For example, in the UK, degree courses in health and social care are constructed as integrated modular programmes; they are designed as a whole. Whereas a course in history may just be a collection of modules, with little if any integration, that students just take in order to gain a degree. Curriculum design thus impinges upon tutors' and students' roles and responsibilities and the ways in which learning and knowledge are perceived. However, new and different forms of PBL continue to emerge and with them an increasing interest in the kinds of discipline-based pedagogies that affect curriculum design.

Although there is a considerable body of literature on facilitation and PBL (Silén, 2006; Wilkie, 2004) there is relatively little that examines the issue of student engagement. Trowler and Trowler's (2010) literature review recognised that student engagement has received extensive attention internationally and individual student learning dominates the evidence reported. In their review, definitions of student engagement are presented, which include the extent to which students are engaging in activities that contribute towards desired (high-quality) learning outcomes. Zepke and Leach (2010) similarly

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