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## Practice Papers

# Aligning principles and practice in problem-based hospitality management education



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## ABSTRACT

**Context:** In 1987, Stenden Hotel Management School was founded as the third hotel management school in the Netherlands offering a four-year BA programme. Two significant distinctive features of the new hotel management school were its full-fledged teaching hotel and its educational approach based on the principles of problem-based learning (PBL).

**Objectives:** This study addresses the question why problem-based learning is considered to be well-suited for hospitality management education.

**Method:** We reflected on our experiences with and research on problem-based learning and on our observations of tutors and students in problem-based learning groups. Current literature on problem-based learning was reviewed to identify relevant issues critical to the effectiveness of problem-based learning. Seven lecturers were interviewed about their experiences with PBL.

**Results:** Five relevant issues were identified: implementation and maintenance of problem-based learning; the seven-step procedure as a scaffolding tool to structure problem solving and to support the learning process; the design and relevance of PBL-tasks; the role and performance of tutors; the constructive alignment of PBL-principles and assessment of student performance.

**Conclusion:** It can be concluded that problem-based learning can be a successful educational innovation provided that sufficient management support is given to the maintenance of problem-based learning by training of tutors and students in the educational principles and practices. Insufficient maintenance of problem-based learning might bring the central position of problem-based learning under discussion by adding conventional teaching methods to the curriculum.

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## 1. Introduction

Problem-based learning was first introduced to medical and health sciences education and has proven to be very successful (Barrows, 1996, 2002; Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Schmidt et al., 2010). The integration of problem-based learning into business and economics education is less common and little literature can be found on problem-based learning in hospitality management education (Huang, 2005; Kivela & Kivela, 2005; Pang, Wong, & Wong, 2013).

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Problem-based learning was introduced as an essential feature of a thematic-modular and interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum because students have to learn how to analyse and solve real-life problems to gain competencies that are relevant to the hospitality industry. Our model of problem-based learning can be categorised as hybrid model of problem-based learning according to [Hung's \(2011\)](#) classification of six models of problem-based learning ranging from pure problem-based learning, hybrid problem-based learning, anchored instruction, project-based learning, case-based learning, to instruction with problem solving activities. In another classification, [Schmidt, Van der Molen, Te Winkel, and Wijnen \(2009\)](#) describe problem-based learning as a cognitive constructivist approach, a process of enquiry, and a tool for lifelong learning. The curriculum focuses on the acquisition and application of competencies which is characteristic of a cognitive constructivist approach to education and fits the model of hybrid problem-based learning because besides two weekly problem-based learning tutorials a limited number of workshops and interactive lectures are scheduled. During practice weeks and industrial placement no PBL-tutorials take place.

Over time, the central position of problem-based learning in the hospitality management curriculum has changed. In the beginning, every teacher and subject contributed to problem-based learning. Nowadays, problem-based learning is perceived as a relevant educational method and is still an important part of the educational approach but is no longer acknowledged as the leading principle for the development and delivery of the curriculum. Other methods like action learning, case-based learning, real-world learning have been introduced in addition to and parallel with problem-based learning. Nevertheless, problem-based learning is still one of the pillars of the educational policy at Stenden University of Applied Sciences.

Problem-based learning has proven to be a sustainable innovation in the medical and health sciences ([Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003](#); [Dolmans, Wolphagen, Van der Vleuten, & Wijnen, 2001](#); [Gijbels, Dochy, Van den Bossche, & Segers, 2005](#)). For example, research by [Schmidt et al. \(2010\)](#) showed that in a PBL-curriculum not only more students graduate but they also needed on average five months less to graduate compared to students from conventional programmes. In other fields of study comparable results could be demonstrated. Graduation rates for the first year of study in a problem-based psychology curriculum were higher than in a comparable conventional curriculum ([Severiens & Schmidt, 2009](#)). Moreover, students judge their study with higher satisfaction rates and show a more positive attitude towards their study ([Major & Palmer, 2001](#)). Despite critique on its constructivist nature ([Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006](#)), and discussions about its effectiveness ([Albanese, 2000](#); [Albanese & Mitchell, 1993](#); [Vernon & Blake, 1993](#)), problem-based learning has proven its value for higher professional education ([Dolmans, Wolphagen, Van der Vleuten, & Wijnen, 2001](#); [Schmidt, Loyens, Van Gog, & Paas, 2007](#); [Taylor & Mifflin, 2008](#)).

### 1.1. Rationale of problem-based learning

Problem-based learning is often seen as an example of constructivist theories of education ([Savery & Duffy, 1996](#); [Savery, 2006](#)). Real-world problems derived from day-to-day practice in the international hospitality industry provide the starting point for the learning process in PBL. No abbreviation but problem-based learning. In groups of 12 students that meet twice a week, prior knowledge is activated by discussing and analysing problems, resulting in a series of learning goals, which are investigated over a two-day period of individual study between the two weekly 90 min PBL-sessions. In the first session, the students are confronted with the PBL-task and use their prior knowledge to elaborate on what they already know about the problem and set the goals for self study ([Dochy, 1992](#); [Dochy, Moerkerke, & Segers, 1999](#)). Results of students' individual study are shared with the group in the next PBL-session and are integrated in and connected to a conceptual network, representing the group's current understanding of relevant subject matter. The students construct mental models of the problem by activating and connecting their prior knowledge to new ideas and concepts. For successful knowledge building, it is essential that students share, discuss, and integrate their newly acquired knowledge and concepts into their cognitive structures by discussion and review of their ideas in the PBL-session to enhance understanding and to facilitate recall of subject matter. It is a collaborative learning activity in which students learn in and through groups by discussing beliefs and ideas to create meaningful knowledge. Students' negotiation of meaning in PBL-sessions is an essential element in constructivist education.

Collaborative learning enables students to develop essential social and communicative competences that they will require for their careers in hospitality management. Students are challenged to become active and self-directed learners. They take responsibility for their learning process, which implies that students plan their own study activities, identify own knowledge gaps, use a wide range of learning resources and monitor their learning process to achieve results ([Barrows, 2002](#); [Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Struyven, 2005](#); [Hmelo-Silver, 2004](#); [Van den Hurk, 2006](#)).

## 2. Method

In this practice paper, we reflected on our personal experiences with problem-based learning groups. Observations of beginning tutors during PBL-training sessions and observations of beginning and experienced tutors in PBL-groups contributed to gaining insight in the PBL-process. Literature on problem-based learning was used to identify relevant issues critical to the effectiveness of problem-based learning. Moreover, we interviewed seven lecturers about their role as a PBL-tutor and their opinions about problem-based learning.

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