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A Taste of PBL: Energizing Your Classroom through Problem-Based Learning

Facilitated by: Alexis Lowe, Tori, Veronica, Joseph Coppola, Mary-Ellen Jacobs, Stamatis Muratidis

What is Problem-based Learning (PBL)?

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an educational strategy that attempts to connect course concepts and content to the real world. PBL traditionally involves a small group of students working together to solve a challenging, multifaceted problem related to a specific discipline. Students work collaboratively to analyze their problem, research their problem, and generate a workable solution.

In a problem-based learning (PBL) model, students engage complex, challenging problems and collaboratively work toward their resolution. PBL is about students connecting disciplinary knowledge to real-world problems—the motivation to solve a problem becomes the motivation to learn.

Characteristics of effective PBL problems:

- Begins with a complex problem that requires a decision
- Based on relevant learning objectives
- Engages students with a “hook”
- Presents prompting questions
- Includes formative and summative assessment
- Requires a research component
- Presented through thoughtful staging
- Requires oral or written communication performance

Why are we doing PBL?

The over-arching goal of the college’s five-year Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is to create a college-wide culture of active learning. Problem-based learning (PBL) was selected as the vehicle to implement active learning because it engages students in real world problems while simultaneously promoting critical thinking, teamwork, and reflection -- all essential skills for students to be academically successful and career ready.

The QEP process, which began in Fall 2012, involves implementing four, year-long iterations of faculty cohorts that would receive extensive professional development in order to incorporate PBL methods into their teaching. At the end of the four year period (Spring 2016), approximately 40-48 instructors, with special emphasis on faculty teaching high risk courses, will have been trained in PBL. The effectiveness of the QEP will be determined by assessing the impact of problem-based learning on students’ critical thinking skills.

Example of PBL Problem

PBL problems can be created for any discipline. For example, Juan Tejeda, a member of the first PBL cohort, designed a PBL scenario titled “Romantic Rap: Gangsta of Love” for students in his music appreciation course:

Radio Station KLUV, an alternative rap and hip-hop station, is sponsoring a very different type of songwriting contest: write a song that combines rap music and lyrics with music, subject matter, and musical forms from the Romantic Period. First prize is \$5,000, a recording contract to record the winning tune, and a showcase performance of the song at the First Romantic Rap: Gangsta of Love Concert. You decide to get together with various friends from your music and music appreciation classes at Palo Alto College and participate in the contest by writing some songs.

In response to this problem, students work in teams to research musical forms and artists of the Romantic Period and the Rap movement. Based on the information they find, the teams create and perform original songs that infuse romantic music forms with rap music.

Frequently Asked Questions?

Does the entire class have to be infused with problem-based learning?

No, just one assignment should be structure in the PBL format.

Is it only for STEM classes?

No, any discipline can use PBL in the classroom.

Quotes from students about PBL

“This class made me think about real life problems....”

“It teaches you to come up with your own ideas. It forces you to use your own thoughts even if they were wrong”

“I learned how to solve my own problems rather than turning to my teacher for answers”

“I learned not to judge and now understand that many individuals think differently”

“PBL offers an individual a lot more than regular course does. These classes offer a person to really put their voice into discussions and become interactive with the class”

“It’s a great experience to sharpen one’s communication skills especially if the individual is a very reserved person”

“This course allows students to have a voice... PBL expects the students to engage with each other to vocalize the content in front of us.”

Making Connections, Learning in Community: An Interdisciplinary Workshop

Facilitated by Yolanda Reyna, Patrick Lee, and Joseph Coppola

Summary: Learning communities involve a cohort of students strategically placed together in two or more courses for a semester with intentionally integrated course work by faculty and specifically designed student supports.

Participants will collaborate with a potential learning community partner to create a shared assignment and identify challenges in designing a learning community by understanding the following:

- 1) Collaborate with your learning community partner prior to the implementing the linked course.
 - A. What is your learning community partner's preferred method of communication such as email, office phone number, face to face, or cell phone?
 - B. Will you and your learning community partner be available to meet several times prior to the start of the learning community?
 - C. Will you and your partner have follow up meetings after the learning community has begun?
 - D. Do you and your partner have similar instructional styles? Do you both prefer lecture, group activities, writing assignments, or multiple choice exams?
 - E. Will disagreements in teaching policy such as required attendance between you and your partner cause inconsistent policies for students?
 - F. Are you and your partner responsible for the same core curriculum objectives so that an assignment can be created addressing both courses?
- 2) Create an integrative assignment
 - A. Provide the course information to your partner including the course student learning outcomes and a copy of your syllabus.
 - B. Is there a real world interdisciplinary problem which can be explored in the context of both courses? Is there an assignment that both you and your partner would agree upon that would involve course SLOs from each course that when integrated could enable student achievement of the course student learning outcomes and produce a written, oral, or visual response which would address the real world interdisciplinary problem.
- 3) Scaffold integrative assignments if necessary
 - A. Dissect the skill set and knowledge required of students to complete the integrative assignment. How would you and your partner design two or three class activities and create mini-assignments to help students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to complete the larger assignment?
 - B. Identify how you and your learning community partner will sequence these smaller assignments to align with the larger integrative assignment so students can be successful in completion.
- 4) Grading integrative assignments
 - A. Will you and your partner accept revisions and drafting from your students?
 - B. How will you and your partner grade the assignment and what criteria will be used?
- 5) Sustain your learning community

- A. How will your students know this is a learning community?
- B. Will you check in with your partner during the semester?
- C. Will you student progress with your partner during the semester? Will you consult Student Services or make referrals to academic and student support services when students could benefit from those services?
- D. Will you visit each other's classrooms or create out-of-class experiences to support the integration of classes?

Examples of learning communities include:

Bunker Hill Community College <http://www.bhcc.mass.edu/learning-communities/learningcommunityclusters/>

Kingsborough Community College <http://www.kbcc.cuny.edu/lc/Pages/LearningCommunities.aspx>

Washington Center at Evergreen College <http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/>

Ohio University <http://www.ohio.edu/learningcommunities/>

Duke University <http://focus.duke.edu/clusters-courses>

Northwest Vista College
http://www.alamo.edu/uploadedFiles/NVC/Academics/Learning_Communities/Documents/201410-Flyer-LC-Summary-List.pdf

Purdue University http://www.purdue.edu/studentsuccess/orientation/learning_communities/

Syracuse University <http://lc.syr.edu/>

Program Assessment

SACS-COC Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1 states, “The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas

3.3.1.1 educational programs, to include student learning outcomes

As faculty evaluate the extent outcomes have been achieved they can identify teaching and learning opportunities for making continuous improvement to student learning exist and make data informed decisions for designing improvements.

Program Assessment Report Template

Program or Certificate:

Academic Year Assessed:

Program Lead Faculty:

Department Chair:

Program Learning Outcome #1	Identify knowledge, skills, or behaviors that graduates of the program should attain.
Assessment Measure	Identify direct measures which will provide evidence that students have attained proficiency towards achieving the program learning outcome.
Targets	Identify the desired target in which faculty expect a particular number of students to demonstrate proficiency in achieving the program learning outcome.
Results	What were the results of the assessment measure towards students demonstrating proficiency of the program student learning outcome?
Target Met or Not Met	Do the assessment results demonstrate the desired target was achieved?
New action plan for Improvement of student learning	Create an action plan which will lead to greater student attainment of the desired program learning outcome.
Evaluation of previous cycle's action plans	Did the previous assessment cycle's action plan led to any improvement of student attainment of the desired program learning outcome?

Additional Resources to Complete Program Assessment Reports

Washtenaw Community College

<http://www4.wccnet.edu/departments/curriculum/progdata.php?levelone=courseassessment>

Mesalands Community College <http://www.mesalands.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Student-Learning-Assessment-Program-Reports-2012-2013.pdf>

Lane Community College article from Trudy Bers

<http://www.lanecollege.edu/sites/default/files/assessment/proglevelassessmentbybers.pdf>

IDEA PAPER http://www.theideacenter.org/sites/default/files/IDEA_Paper_45.pdf

The Key to Key Assignments Spring Convocation Presentation

Key Assignment FAQs

1. What are key assignments? Assignments which are embedded for a course grade and subsequently used for program or general education assessment are considered a key assignment. Key assignments align the course student learning outcomes to the program and general education learning outcomes. Key assignments are typically designed through collaboration among faculty.
2. Why are we developing key assignments? A number of faculty have expressed concern with the difficulty of creating assignments for general education assessment which address all the criteria associated with the core objective rubrics. Key assignments offer faculty an opportunity to collaborate to design an assignment which addresses the course student learning outcomes and the criteria associated with the core objective rubrics. Also, faculty have question the value general education assessment brings to the classroom. Since general education assessment was not designed to bring results directly back to the classroom, key assignments offer faculty an opportunity to design common assignments which can be used for program or course-level assessment.
3. Must I have one key assignment that addresses all the core curriculum objectives my course is responsible for? While some faculty may creatively design one assignment that addresses each of the criteria associated with the core curriculum objectives the course is responsible for, it might be unrealistic for all faculty to develop one. Faculty may consider designing one key assignment which addresses each core curriculum objective the course is responsible for. Faculty may find designing a key assignment to address both critical thinking and communication easier than one addressing personal responsibility and teamwork.
4. How often do I have to administer my key assignment? Faculty are expected to administer the key assignment aligned to the core objective rubric each year in which the core objective is being assessed. As an example, the key assignment the course uses for critical thinking must be used in all sections of that course in which the faculty teaches the course and administered to all students.
5. Must I develop a rubric for the key assignment? Educational research suggests students perform better when being providing the rubrics in advance. Faculty may also consider providing the rubric to students in order to provide a self-assessment of their work or a peer assessment of a student.

Guide to Developing Key Assignment

1. Complete the appropriate Core Objective Key Assignment Template.
2. Conduct an inventory of all your assignments for the course.
3. Identify which assignment addresses all of the criteria associated with the selected core objective rubric. Refer to the core objective rubric to determine alignment.
4. If the assignment addresses all of the criteria associated with the selected core objective rubric, please complete the key assignment planning template and submit to your department chair.

5. If the assignment does not address all of the criteria associated with the selected core objective rubric, please collaborate with your peers to design an assignment that addresses all of the criteria associated with the core objective rubric.

Resources for developing key assignments

1. <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/school-of-education/ncate-accreditation/soe/assessments>
2. <http://www.slcc.edu/assessment/>
3. http://www.umass.edu/oapa/oapa/publications/online_handbooks/course_based.pdf
4. <http://www.uta.edu/irp/unit-effectiveness-process/assets/Signature-Assignment-Resources.pdf>
5. <https://www.utexas.edu/ugs/sig/plan/samples>

Teamwork – Key Assignment Planning Template

Course: _____

Faculty incorporating the assignment: _____

Title of the Assignment: _____

Brief Description of the Assignment: Describe what you want your students to produce and/or submit. Include the type of task to be completed and the nature of the teamwork activity involved. Will students have an opportunity to rate each other?

Briefly Describe how the students will be prepared to work in a team: _____

What course learning outcomes does the assignment address?

Please explain how the assignment addresses the following criteria from the teamwork core curriculum objective rubric:

The student makes a quality contribution to the Team Activity: _____

The student treats fellow team members courteously with respect: _____

The student models personal attributes that contribute to teamwork: _____

Can faculty use the key assignment for the following: ☐ Classroom ☐ Hybrid ☐ On-Line
☐ IVC ☐ Telecourses

Completed by _____ Date Completed _____

Communication – Key Assignment Planning Template

Course: _____

Faculty incorporating the assignment: _____

Title of the Assignment: _____

Brief Description of the Assignment: Describe what you want your students to produce and/or submit. Include the type of task to be completed and the primary mode of communication for the assignment: written, oral, or visual. What directions were provided to the student on the content and purpose of the assignment? What directions were provided to the student on the organization of the content for the assignment?

What course learning outcomes does the assignment address?

Please explain how the assignment addresses the following criteria from the communication core curriculum objective rubric:

The student uses relevant content that conveys understanding: _____

The student uses disciplinary conventions for organizing content and presenting content: _____

The student uses communication tools appropriately and skillfully for academic and professional contexts: _____

Can faculty use the key assignment for the following: ☐ Classroom ☐ Hybrid ☐ On-Line
☐ IVC ☐ Telecourses

Completed by _____ Date Completed _____