PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING: An innovative approach to learning and teaching

Problem-based learning (PBL) has become widely used in many professional educations and is now being adopted by nurse educationalists for use within their teaching strategies. According to nurse teachers, problem-based learning is highly regarded and promoted as a most effective teaching and learning method to take nurse education forward.23

PBL has its origins some 25 years ago in medical education at universities in McMaster (Canada), Case Western Reserve (USA), Maastricht (Netherlands) and Newcastle (Australia), and since then it has gained popularity worldwide.

However, there are many barriers to implementing PBL and many academics consider the approach to be radical and resources intensive. The main obstacle is perhaps due to the fact that academics cannot come to terms with students who will be able to handle problems without being "given foundations."29

The other argument is the "pure" form of PBL as developed in medical education has proved to be a barrier for others who wish to adopt some aspect of it. This is because medical schools tend to be well resourced, and recruit highly motivated and high achieving students.5

Nevertheless, the challenge is to adapt the approach to meet the different needs of students and to transform teaching and learning for the benefit of learners of all ages.6

There are many definitions of problem-based learning, but the concept is to encourage learners to participate actively in seeking the whole picture. They should engage in reflective practice and evaluation among themselves, peers and groups, and use exploratory ways to make sense of new ideas and experiences within the learning process so deep learning will occur. Schwartz2 (2004) endorses this approach as graduates from PBL courses are prepared for a lifetime of learning and discovery, and are more motivated and satisfied with their education.

The purpose of introducing PBL into the design of teaching community mental health specialist practitioner students is to improve the quality of student learning. The approach calls for trying it out as a discrete part of a course module. It is with the hope that students are able to apply theory to practice, and will value the opportunity to share experiential learning and common goals, and thus contribute to improving the appreciation of multidisciplinary and collaborative working.

Cannon and Newble7(2000) suggest that PBL also requires students to develop a whole range of skills to enable them to learn effectively, including information skills, team working skills, communication and, most importantly, high order cognitive skills for professional development – the type of key skills that are valued by most employers.

References

4Biggs J (2003). Teaching for quality learning at the university, Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press. Biggs uses PBL to illustrate "constructive alignment" within a model which emphasises the need to align learning objectives, learning and teaching methods, and assessment.

More from Nessie Shia at: nessie.shia@brunel.ac.uk

ELEANOR METCALF reports.