

The Interpreted Curriculum: Students' Constructions of Problem-Based Learning Groups

Vicki Skinner

School of Dentistry
The University of Adelaide

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Supervisors

Associate Professor Tracey Winning, School of Dentistry, Faculty of Health Sciences, The University of Adelaide

Professor Annette-Braunack Mayer, School of Population Health and Clinical Practice, Faculty of Health Sciences, The University of Adelaide

Adjunct Associate Professor Gerry Mullins, School of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, Computer and Mathematical Sciences, The University of Adelaide

Associate Professor Ray Peterson, Discipline of Medical Education, Mayne Medical School, The University of Queensland

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I address the meaning of problem-based learning (PBL) groups for students. The group is generally a core element of PBL. Theoretical conceptions of the ideal PBL group have ranged from it being a setting for individual knowledge development to it being a site for students' professional enculturation. However, PBL research from diverse theoretical perspectives has produced results about groups that are not consistent with theoretical conceptions of groups. Research has also demonstrated that students interpret PBL differently to theoretical and curriculum conceptions of PBL, hence the notion of „interpreted curriculum“. These findings raise the issue of how students interpret PBL groups and the implications this has for practice.

My study addressed this aspect of the interpreted curriculum via the following research questions: *What is the nature of a PBL group for students? What is the purpose and value of a PBL group for students?* Informed by social constructionist theory, the study was a qualitative investigation based on an ethnographic approach, employing observation and interviewing to collect data. The participants were volunteer first-year undergraduate dental students in Adelaide, Australia and Dublin, Ireland.

The thesis contributes to knowledge about PBL groups and provides recommendations for practice. It explains how students understood PBL group structure, dynamics and function, and how they understood work and learning in relation to PBL and the group. In response to the research questions, I found that, for students, the nature of the PBL group was primarily social, with its success related to the personality mix of group members and the subsequent roles and relationships. The group purpose in PBL was to do the work of gathering knowledge, which then supplemented the private learning efforts of individual members, which was constructed as taking in knowledge. In both Dental Schools, the value of the group was to provide social, emotional, and academic support to students, although learning support varied in each School according to the curriculum and assessment structure.

Based on students' explanations, I describe a student ideal group and develop my account of the interpreted curriculum by comparing this group to a theoretical ideal group. While the student group was socially driven and separated work and learning, the theoretical group was primarily a work group that integrated work and learning. To

account for this, I explain that students constructed PBL groups with a conceptual framework that was inconsistent with the conceptual foundation of the theoretical PBL group.

The wider contribution of this thesis is to illustrate that students operated with explicit and implicit understandings that were counter to the theoretical principles on which PBL groups were based and designed, and that this had ramifications for group function. The recommendations for practice take account of these differences, and aim to help students to establish PBL groups that function on the model of a professional team. The recommendations are designed to assist students to develop their concepts of teams, knowledge, and learning, and to enhance students' personal, professional, and academic development through participation in PBL groups.

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