

The Significance of the Tutorial Process

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Today's plenary session has its focus on the tutorial process. Different perspectives are explored and discussed based on experiences with PBL in different countries. If there is some repetition in the views expressed, I believe this repetition can only emphasize the significance of the tutorial process.

From my perspective, the small group tutorial is the forum in which problem-management and self-directed learning, supported by a facilitative teaching role, are activated and integrated for reaching the goals of a problem-based curriculum. The tutorial can be seen as the 'hub' for learning. The small group activities foster awareness of programme and personal objectives; they support professional and personal development, and give learning a context of purpose and meaning.

The tutorial process is significant for developing students' critical thinking and reasoning skills in dealing with professionally relevant situations/problems. It is further significant in helping them become independent, self-directed learners, who learn to manage learning effectively and develop an attitude of responsibility for life-long learning. Learning how to learn is an important educational goal which aims to assure future relevance of professional knowledge, as ongoing social and technological changes affect the needs of society.

In this presentation I shall: examine some complexities of the tutorial process, identify common areas of concern and, offer and integrate some suggestions for making the tutorial work.

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Each educational programme adopting problem-based learning for its curriculum needs to understand the central role of the tutorial process and its complexities. Within the tutorial, the guiding philosophy and the aims and goals of problem-based learning find expression, and

build knowledge by challenging each others understanding. The type of interactions and associated learning will be influenced by group dynamics – how verbal and non-verbal messages are perceived and responded to from the perspective of each person. Individual personalities and established patterns of behaviour will affect group work and learning. Without attention to these factors, the tutorial process can quickly deteriorate leaving students demoralized, frustrated and reluctant to function in a group. On the other hand, these dynamics can be used constructively for developing skills in communication and collaboration, essential for working with others and for multiprofessional teamwork. The group process provides the context in which the other two processes of problem-solving and self-directed learning unfold and develop. In itself, the group process provides a learning that meets educational goals.

A group has to undergo its own developmental process before trust among members and productive work is established. This development requires understanding and support. In my experience, it takes anywhere from 6 to 8 weeks for a tutorial group to reach productive maturity based on bi-weekly meetings of about 2 hours each. Planners of courses, teachers or units tend to base time allotment on content to be covered. This creates certain pressures within the tutorial. It causes emphasis on knowledge acquisition and application to the detriment of learning how to function effectively in a tutorial group. The group process needs ongoing attention and responsibility as group function has to be shared by all. Students and tutor need time and support to acquire knowledge and skills for group work before they can become fully responsible for handling group dynamics. Both the problem-solving and self-directed learning process depend for their optimal functioning on the group – trust and cohesiveness of members will foster constructive interactions.

Self-directed learning is closely linked with the process of dealing with a problem. The given situation, selected and designed to meet programme objectives, requires an analytical and focused approach. Yet at the same time, it needs to offer scope for generating ideas, issues and concerns so that broader perspectives ensure holistic, integrated learning.

The interrelatedness of the two processes is reflected in the so called "Seven Jumps", developed by the University of Limburg in Maastricht. These seven jumps or steps have been widely adopted for PBL in Sweden (Silen, 1991). On the one hand, the steps outline the process of problem-solving and give directives for self-directed learning; they provide structure and offer guidance. On the other hand, they tend to become goal in themselves – a sacred bible or commandment – that require adherence and therefore tends to become a hindrance in the tutorial process.

just a few that have often been brought to my attention in my consulting work on PBL in Sweden. Further, I am aware that the literature, specifically the journal *Academic Medicine*, has presented a number of review articles within the last three years. These articles raise questions about merit, express concerns, and evaluate structures and functions of PBL. (Norman et al., 1992; Albanese, et al., 1993; Vernon, et al., 1993; Berkson, 1993)

Those who are considering or have recently launched a PBL curriculum, as well as those who question merit, are often preoccupied with the concern for content learning. Can the tutorial replace the lecture? Do students learn enough in the tutorial and with PBL? How will the basic sciences get adequately covered and learned? Such questions reflect the difficulty in changing from a subject-based orientation to a problem-based orientation for learning. Teachers responsible for an educational programme relate primarily to their own area or subject of expertise. They compare or try to find – their previous lecture content, – often valued as essential for students' knowledge, – in the context of problem presentations or tutorials. Evaluative research has shown that medical students from a PBL curriculum, have lower achievement levels on examinations structured for knowledge recall, than students from a conventional curriculum (Albanese, et al., 1993). Yet, research has also shown that PBL graduates have a higher retention level of knowledge when tested over time (Norman, et al., 1992). I find, from a professional point of view, based on more than 20 years of experience and follow-up studies, there is no indication that PBL educated practitioners are not adequately prepared for the demands and challenges of their practice.

The concern about content learning is important but we need to examine why? when? and, for whom? it is important. Students often express concern they are not sure if they are learning enough. Evaluative processes within the tutorial and specific evaluation measures, consistent with PBL, can give ongoing feedback and assurance of learning progress. In dealing with the concern for content, a change in expectations has to occur. We need to move from seeing knowledge as a measure of quantity to seeing it in context – within processes – as a qualitative measure in problem-solving and self directed learning.

Content learning in PBL is generated by the problem-situations or events that are the focus for tutorial learning. The presented situations are selected and developed by faculty, based on educational goals and objectives. As such, they guide progressive, coordinated learning in the tutorials throughout the programme.

Problems must be carefully selected to assure scope and depth of content learning. Each profession using PBL for its curriculum needs

A number of issues and concerns relate to faculty. How directive should or need tutors be in the tutorial process? – and for what reasons? How should tutors function in the learning process of PBL? Barrows (1992) outlines the meta-function of the tutor which is facilitative and non-directive. At a conference on PBL held at McMaster last June (1994), a number of presentations focused on the tutor's role in PBL. Directiveness varies across programmes and the issue of the expert versus non-expert tutor is frequently a topic of controversy. Students often comment on inconsistencies they experience in their tutors as they move from group to group. This is a source of confusion and concern, as students have to learn how to use PBL and self-directed learning effectively. In my own work as consultant on PBL in Sweden, I have worked with about 12 different institutions. I found, that the role of the tutor and related issues are the most frequent topics of concern and discussion. Teachers as tutors, grapple with a major role change and experience traumatic role ambiguity. In these discussions it has often struck me that a change in attitude has to occur before there can be a role change with lasting effect. The change from a teacher-centered, subject-based teaching role, to that of facilitator of learning processes that are student-centered and problem-based, is indeed a very difficult task which requires time and support. How much attention do planners of PBL curricula give to this change process? Are we measuring the merits or demerits of PBL based on content retention or external licensing examinations without raising questions about qualitative aspects of tutoring? What are our basic goals in selecting PBL? – How can we make it work at its optimal level? These questions relate to attitude formation. They point to a need for the preparation of faculty and students in order to gain the most from PBL.

Returning briefly to the issue of tutor directedness in tutorials, it must be clear that with more directedness there is a return to a more teacher-centered approach. Both teachers and students will feel more secure in reverting to the "old system", where teachers take control and students rely on "teacher knows best" for their learning.

The issue of expert versus non-expert tutor is both a philosophical and a practical one. Philosophically, if the tutor is an expert facilitator in the problem-solving process, the self-directed learning process and the group process, then he/she is able to meet all the demands of the tutorial process in PBL. This sounds a bit too simple and presumes that the selected problems which steer learning are developed at a high level of sophistication – that is, they cover all that students need to learn in a given time. Those concerned with content learning, have found that students learn more in tutorial sessions where the tutor is an expert on the content under discussion

subject-centered. Students are driven by content needed to pass tests and both problem-solving and self-directed learning will be largely defeated. Within PBL there is ongoing assessment. The evaluation of knowledge and skills is thoroughly integrated into the learning process and a part of each tutorial session. This type of evaluation is essential and useful; supports learning but it is not tangible enough as evidence of success; meeting course objectives – and programme goals. Most curricula require examinations at certain intervals as proof of learning achievement. In PBL the challenge is to develop testing methods that are consistent with the processes. Knowledge has to have context and relevance.

I suggest, if we want to be successful with PBL and make the tutorial process work, we need to examine and deal with the above areas of concern and related issues. The presenting problem and the role of tutor and student in the tutorial process require preparation and ongoing attention to gain the most from PBL. If students are spared prolonged confusion and uncertainty resulting from inadequacies in presenting problems and the role of the tutor, they can adapt readily to the complexities of the tutorial process. Once students have developed skills and have grasped the significance of the tutorial process for their learning and development they will assert themselves and assist the tutor to become effective in the facilitative role. They will also voice constructive feedback to make presenting problems more interesting and suitable for their learning needs. It is advisable to assign the most experienced tutors to the first tutorials, – the first segment of studies, – the students encounter.

Students who find meaning in what and how they learn are highly motivated. Learning becomes enjoyable and personally rewarding. Energy and effort exerted in the learning task often exceed all expectations. Personally, I have been often amazed by what students will do, find and accomplish when they feel free to learn and own responsibility for their learning.

It is within the tutorial process, that we, as teachers/tutors, must show our trust in students – in their abilities and efforts. Our own responsibility lies in setting clear goals and in providing resources that guide and support the students in their learning. Students and faculty share responsibility in making the tutorial process and PBL successful.