



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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PBL IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Since its introduction in medical schools approximately 30 years ago, problem-based learning (PBL) has been touted justifiably as a means of getting students actively involved in determining what and how they learn. Small-group PBL effectively transforms students from passive to active learners with critical thinking skills that last a lifetime.

While applications of PBL in the natural sciences have been common in universities and community colleges, little has been written about PBL in the humanities at the college level. My own research has shown that only a limited number of community colleges include PBL in the teaching of English. Undaunted, I have featured PBL for the last two years in my own English composition classes and have witnessed an excitement about research and learning unrivaled in my teaching career. And with this enthusiasm has come a bonus—a 20% improvement in my students' scores on the California Test of Critical Thinking Skills.

Given an average class size of 30 students, I am able to create five groups of six members each based on ACT scores, always attempting to achieve parity in abilities among the groups. Each group chooses a reporter, a scribe, and a challenger. The reporter is the designated speaker for the group—the individual I hold directly responsible for group progress. Of course, the scribe keeps the written record of all group sessions and is expected to record group responses when chart or board work occurs. The challenger plays the role of spoiler by questioning the majority opinion and exposing fallacies in logic wherever they exist. After one week of group interaction, I allow the group leaders to resign and suggest suitable replacements; deferring to natural leaders with the consent of group members facilitates learning and promotes harmony. Yet, I reserve the right to veto resignations when they seem unwarranted or prove troublesome. And, unless there is some manifest need to modify groups, I keep the same group members throughout the semester. Groups become real teams by

the time the first project has been completed.

My course is problem-driven; the problems are open-ended, requiring groups to shape their own research strategies. There are no right answers, and I am careful not to lead students by revealing my own biases or answering crucial questions for them. Students who are accustomed to being spoon-fed often become frustrated at this point and demand to know what is important for the tests or what should be included in the group papers. Overcoming my natural instinct to help has been an ongoing problem, but I have learned that the best help I can provide is to suggest appropriate resources and allow students to learn how to learn for themselves. My PBL students use the Learning Resource Center twice as often as other students at the college.

Comp I is not ordinarily problem-driven. Most courses are devoted to the study of rhetoric, and most writing assignments are expressive. While this may be the accepted rule, I find that my PBL students routinely exceed the accomplishments of students in my traditional classes. The previously mentioned gain of 20% in critical thinking skills is one testimony to that success.

Over the past two years, I have implemented PBL through modules. No matter what the project, a group paper and individual papers are required of each group. The group papers must be at least six typed pages, be documented, have a sentence outline, and adhere to the departmental standards for style. Individual papers are held to the same requirements but must be no more than three typed pages. Ideally, the groups themselves have chosen research topics for individual papers around learning issues that have developed from discussions. These papers may be revised, but group papers may not. Moreover, I require that individual papers be submitted one week or so before group papers. This gives me time to mark and return those papers and gives students valuable information about expectations for style and mechanical correctness that can be used in preparing the group papers. Revised individual papers are due a week following the submission of group papers.

All students in the group receive the group grade; thus, all have a vested interest in achieving excellence.



Individual papers provide evidence of participation in the research process and document contributions to the group paper. Group and individual papers carry the same weight in determining grades. Students complete three projects each semester and spend an average of two weeks class time on each project.

For one group project, students were to consider this scenario: "The president has asked that each state pose solutions to the problem of school violence, and the governor of Mississippi has asked every community college to offer suggestions. Each PBL group must carefully study the problem and submit solutions to the dean of instruction at Itawamba Community College." For every module, I provide students with articles to

MAKING SPELL CHECKER WORK

As an instructor who spans the pre- and post-spell-checker era, I have noticed a big difference in misspelled words that infest student papers. The difference is not that the number of errors has decreased but that the type of error has changed.

Many pre-spell-check errors were of the phonetic variety, e.g., "hurding" cattle, baby "dipers," the first "sene" in a play. Since these errors were logical, students got some sympathy from me; I understand that for some students, wrongly spelled words do not just leap off the page. At least, I refrained from tormenting these students with what my spelling-challenged brother maintains is the most useless piece of advice a poor speller can hear: "Why don't you look it up in the dictionary?" Even in those cases where the students know the words are spelled incorrectly, the truly spelling-challenged students cannot use the dictionary because they must have some idea of how the words are spelled to find them there.

As spell-check programs came into common use, my expectations for the quality of student spelling rose—unrealistically, as it turned out. The true typo all but disappeared, but spelling errors persisted and became incomprehensible. Why would a student write "hurddling" cattle, baby "dippers," and first "seen" in a play? These were not phonetic spelling errors; they were real words. Could it be the fault of the spell checker?

Yes, the source of these errors was the spell checker itself. Students who wrote "hurding," "diper," and "sene" were presented with lists from which to choose the right word. Being clueless, they were jumping to incorrect conclusions and left to guess which alternative had the desired meaning. Given the array of options,

initiate discussions and make the writing lab available for Internet research. Choosing modules to which students relate is critical.

While the PBL classroom requires more work of everyone, including the teacher, I am willing to make this commitment because my students deserve my best effort.

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they often just chose the first word on the list. A student whose attempt to spell the word "science" comes out "siense" will not even see the correct option until halfway down the list of possibilities. In a flash of rare insight, I understood that those students who are constitutionally blind to irregular word forms cannot use the spell-checker program in the same way good spellers can.

Hope is not lost! Poor spellers can use spell-checker programs successfully. In using the program, they must take an additional step that better spellers usually can skip. Poor spellers must use the options list as their dictionary guide. The list gives them useful access to the dictionary they have not had before. Each word on the spell-check option screen is in the dictionary, and students can continue to search until they find the word that fits the intended definition. Poor spellers must also keep a list of homonyms close at hand and use the dictionary to search for meanings. Now when we advise poor spellers to "look it up in the dictionary," they can.

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