

Putting on the show: An ethnographic investigation into experiences of problem-based learning (PBL) in nurse education.

Alexandra Carlin¹, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson², Ros Kane², Sharon Black³, Joanna Pierazzo⁴
¹Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, United Kingdom. ²University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom. ³University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom. ⁴McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada

Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

As a student-centred pedagogy, problem-based learning (PBL) has strong potential to develop nurses' collaborative skills and competences. Here, we draw on ethnographic research undertaken in North America and the United Kingdom (UK), to investigate experiences of PBL in nurse education programmes. Pre-registration nursing students and facilitators participated in a total of 33 online, semi-structured interviews, while 56 participants were observed over 65 hours of PBL, both online and in classrooms. Transcripts and fieldnotes were analysed via reflexive thematic analysis. Subsequently, we employed Goffman's dramaturgical approach to generate original insights into PBL as a performance. Salient themes were identified in the data, and here we portray key ones relating to the staging of PBL performances: 1) putting on the show; 2) teams at work; 3) directing the performance. Findings highlighted how PBL can be a somewhat unpredictable pedagogy, due to reliance on sustained social interaction, and effective performances of novice actors.

Full paper

Introduction: Problem-based learning (PBL) is a learning approach where students work together towards the understanding of a problem (Barrows 1996), rather than being instructively 'taught'. In general, students undertaking PBL have opportunities to develop their collaborative working skills by working in small teams where they share, compare and debate information (Wosinski et al. 2018). Social interaction therefore lies at the heart of effective PBL, which requires considerable social skills, and the development of team cohesion (Cooper and Carver 2012). At the time of initiating our research, there was a relative lacuna of micro-sociological studies focusing on the social interactional aspects of

PBL. We were particularly interested, sociologically, in how social interaction within groups affects experiences of PBL as reported by both students and facilitators.

Methodology: An interpretivist perspective was adopted, commensurate with our goal of exploring PBL from the perspectives of students and facilitators themselves, pursued via a focused ethnographic study. Ethical approval was granted by three ethical boards, for each fieldsite, to study students and facilitators in their everyday, 'natural', university settings, and also in online teaching and learning sessions. A total of 33 participants subsequently took part in online, audio-visually recorded, semi-structured interviews of around 60 minutes' duration. In addition, 56 participants were observed, both online and in physical classrooms, providing 65 hours of observational data. From the observations, 26 fieldnotes were combined with 33 interview transcripts to form the dataset.

The theoretical perspective employed in our analysis draws on various of Erving Goffman's works in the microsociology of everyday life, particularly his dramaturgical analyses of social interaction and the interactional order (e.g., Goffman 1959, 1967, 1971). For Goffman (1959), people carefully construct and enact roles in their interactions, seeking to elicit desired responses from their audience. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective and notions of performance regions provided a powerful conceptual framework for analysing social interaction played out in PBL sessions, for this study.

Findings: Three key themes were identified via use of Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic data analysis: 1) putting on the show; 2) teams at work; 3) directing the performance.

Putting on a show describes the social geography of the performance. Dramaturgically, students were actors trying to "pull off" a performance. Performances varied considerably, spanning traditional, and idealised, PowerPoints, pamphlets and information books, to highly creative inputs with use of food substances and textiles. Learning environments influenced shifting conceptualisations of front and back regions. Classrooms required adaptation to the more student-centred pedagogy of PBL, with students analogous to stagehands adjusting the scenery. Online, front and back regions blurred, with presentations of self, normally reserved for the relaxed setting of backstage, entering front regions, such as dogs, doorbells and children being heard over the online feed.

Teams at work highlights the social interactions and experiences of working in teams. Goffman (1959) uses the term team to refer to any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine. Teams can be deemed "good" if they contribute to the desired impression, or "bad" if they give the show away. To mitigate bad performers, various group roles and rules were described to secure normative consensus. Remedial action, such as students who would "make up" a topic area aimed to minimise the impact of bad performers, offering a protective manoeuvre.

Directing the performance focused on the facilitator. Akin to stage directors, facilitators appeared less dramatically, and only minimally, important if the performance was going well. The facilitator would “guide” students or “rekindle the discussion”. One student felt cynical about the role, recognising the potential to “rack up teaching hours” for workload planning. Students valorised facilitators with clinical expertise, providing anecdotes and stories of their experiences to bring theory to life. Facilitators also needed to role model professional behaviours and assess student performance as part of regulatory requirements.

Conclusion: Goffman’s interactionist work offered a powerful theoretical framework for generating original insights into PBL as a performance. PBL can be an unpredictable pedagogy, due its reliance on sustained social interaction, need for collaboration and teamworking, particularly as novice actors (students) must cooperate in team working to “stage the show” competently. Our findings highlight how the facilitator role fluctuates contextually, commensurate with interactionist perspectives on the salience of social context in shaping social interaction. Facilitators, therefore, must remain astute to these social interactions to mitigate ineffective performances.