



The Practice of Problem-based Learning: A Guide to Implementing PBL in the College Classroom

José Amador, Libby Miles, and C. B. Peter; Jossey-Bass, 2007

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A soil scientist, a writing professor, and a sociologist are set adrift in a sea of pedagogy in a leaky rowboat with a single oar and a quart bucket. The boat is leaking at 1.5 gallons per minute and each scholar can bail only one bucket per minute. Assuming the scholars row and bail in five-minute shifts against a tidal drift of 3 knots...

From the very first pages of *The Practice of Problem-based Learning*, readers know there is something different in store for them. The authors, José Amador, Libby Miles, and C. B. Peters, model the collaborative and interactive techniques that lie at the heart of problem-based learning to explore the movement in American higher education toward active learning and “a growing expectation that students be able to use information, not just acquire it” (p. xiii).

So how did these three scholars from three such different disciplines end up, so to speak, in the same boat? Through an abiding interest in the theory and practice of problem-based learning and a compelling desire to share their experiences with other faculty. This eminently readable book, “written with usefulness in mind, providing hands-on guidance from real professors to real professors,” provides an unabashedly practical approach to an educational hot topic that is discussed by many, but understood by few (p. xiv).

The first chapter opens as a conversation between the authors, the research, and the reader that takes place inside the authors’ classrooms, immersing readers in the active and interactive environments created there. Having set the stage, the authors then stand back to give a brief definition and history of PBL, significantly paying as much attention to what it is *not* as they do to what it *is*.

Having “hooked” their readers with their engagingly different style, the authors then confront them with some hard truths. PBL, they warn, requires “a dramatic change in how our instruction is conceived, how the content of our courses is approached, and how our roles as faculty members are enacted” (p. 17). Not the “tinkering” we are all used to doing with our course content and class notes, but real change – change in the classroom, change in the learning landscape, change in course content, change in curriculum, change in assessment techniques, change in faculty, and change in students. Key elements to consider in planning and implementing this change, they note, are faculty role, student learning styles, specific instructional goals, class size, classroom environment and culture, and availability of supportive technologies.

The place to start, they tell readers, is with the problem. Sharing their own successes and failures at choosing or constructing appropriate scenarios to ground PBL activities, the authors advise readers on how to identify, design, and present a successful problem, then give practical tips on how to implement the exercise without getting mired in what they call “the messy middle” (p. 73). First they approach the process from the faculty point of view, giving tips on sequencing, pacing, preparing a syllabus, asking the right questions, and keeping students on task. Then they approach it from the student point of view, discussing preparation, workflow, reporting, and goals. Throughout, the authors offer their own classroom experiences to guide their readers.

The book closes with a discussion of evaluation, revision, and reflection that highlights the power and sustainability of the PBL model. “We can augment our own thoughts [about what worked and what didn’t] with data collected from students,” the authors contend (p. 120). Moreover, “the activities embedded in the practice of PBL are especially well suited for the creation of authentic assessments that ask students to use (rather than merely recall) what they have learned” (p. 129).

Throughout the conversations that constitute this book, the authors provide classroom examples, appendices, rubrics, syllabi, and lesson plans that bring the discussion down to actual practice. They also provide an annotated bibliography to guide interested readers in further study. Faculty, graduate teaching assistants, in-service teachers, and faculty development professionals will all find the down-to-earth, nuts-and-bolts approach of *The Practice of Problem-based Learning* both interesting and useful. Whether or not you intend to implement PBL in your classroom, this book will engage and enlighten you.



[Table of Contents](#) | [Issues](#) | [Credits](#) |
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