EPBL as an alternative to conventional teaching methods: My reflection

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Abstract

ePBL begins with the gathering of all the students in a single portal of the World Wide Web (www) and the teacher would provide a brief clinical scenario in a form of a passage, or a link of a video depicting a medical documentary. It is very much similar to the regular classroom PBL, but with a fascinating scenario presentation. I find this to be a very creative approach for education.

Key Words: ePBL, World Wide Web, classroom PBL

In my four years of experience in medical school, I have been exposed to various types of teaching methods by lecturers, trying their best to ensure our understanding and increasing our knowledge on their respective subjects ranging from regular lecture classes, practical classes, attending hospital postings and to regular classroom Problem Based Learning (PBL) sessions. Despite the various pros and cons of these methods, I, for one, find one particular approach that takes learning to a whole other level.

The very first time that I have encountered ePBL was when I was in a 4-week Ophthalmology posting guided by our Head of Department. He introduced 'electronic Problem Based Learning' (ePBL) on the second week of posting. It was also my first encounter with "Google Virtual Whiteboard". A contemporary approach to PBL was put forth and it was one of the most interesting and innovative method of teaching I have ever experienced.

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video depicting a medical documentary. It is very much similar to the regular classroom PBL, but with a fascinating scenario presentation. I find this to be a very creative approach for education. Situations and problems are put forth with the short articles or videos, and brain storming commences. Discussions are made via a chat room, where any one of us is allowed to question and clear our doubts and comment on the context provided. The exciting fact about the chat room is that enquiries and doubts regarding the subject can be asked without any regard of embarrassment or reluctance. A different kind of confidence emerges when you are in front of a computer screen with fingers rolling through the keyboard. Some students, me included, may feel a bit apprehensive when it comes to questioning during a lecture or a posting session. No matter the reason of apprehension during face to face encounters, I feel that regarding ePBL sessions, doubts are cleared and knowledge can be obtained. Explanations made by the lecturer are written down word by word, thereby ensuring that we do not miss out any information that he/she intends to share.

Learning in the chat room becomes interactive and it evolves into more than just learning. Halfway through the PBL session, students become the teachers, teaching our peers regarding the subject. Despite the interaction between the students, the educator is still right behind the wheel steering us in the right direction if we ever stray away from the right path. I used to get engrossed in the discussion so much that the brainstorming session is much more than just stimulating. Critical thinking is enhanced by the vast amount of communication in the chat room with the ideas, suggestions and comments pouring in. Personally, I find the research component of this ePBL that incorporates and utilizes the modern technology that really defines ePBL as an advanced and emerging method of learning. Once the scenario is put up, research commences almost immediately. With the help of textbooks, scientific journals and the World Wide Web, we are able to refine our research skills by polishing our literature review. Information on the web is vast and a lot of the information put up may be false or misleading. In the world where information is growing, it is crucial that the information picked up is legitimate. By having the literature research part of the PBL done together, it refines our work and benefits not only a single individual of the

group, but as a whole entity. I believe that this skill that we have built together will be beneficial in the long run.

ePBL is fascinating in the sense that it is leaps and bounds ahead of its time. We have heard of online courses and online lectures, but using the web interaction for learning purposes with problem based learning is nothing less than innovative and creative. For some high-achieving lecturers who have devoted their time to research and knowledge, they are required to travel across the globe for conferences and meetings for research purposes. Some may need to return to their homeland for personal reasons. These reasons hinder them from attending lecture classes or PBL sessions personally. However, by using the ePBL strategy, classes can still commence. All one has to do is have access to a computer and the internet. Regardless of where you are, ePBL can be conducted, learning and communicating through a single portal, defying the space time continuum. The lecturer can be half way across the world with students on one side, with just a difference in the ever so fluid relativity of time. In this aspect, technology is used as a cognitive tool for learning which, to me, proves to be as effective as experiencing the scenario first hand.

A few minor caveats are to be acknowledged before incorporating ePBL in the curriculum of any higher education centers. First and foremost, designing an ePBL session can be challenging to those who are not familiar with the modernizing technology which is quickly rising above the standards of the regular pen and paper tradition. In order to lay out an effective ePBL session, the organizer must first be knowledgeable regarding computers and the internet. Going about the internet can be tricky and those who are computer illiterate may need to attend courses to keep themselves updated with the thriving technology of the modern era in the 21st century. In addition to that, one of the pitfalls of this method is the fact that students are allowed to stay home and interact through the internet. Some students may not be able to have the discipline to stay focused and may drift away, engaging themselves in other social networking or entertainment sites that are easily accessible through the computer. The educator or the organizer of the ePBL should monitor

the participation of all students involved and ensure that every individual cooperates and contributes to the discussion and brain storming sessions.

I can consider myself lucky to be able to experience an ePBL session. The ePBL sessions that I have partaken so far has never failed to impress me with the immense amount of knowledge and experience that I have gained throughout. Without a doubt, ePBL sessions, in terms of learning, stands unrivalled compared to other conventional methods. If asked, whether I would recommend the integration of ePBL sessions in all university level education centers, I would highly recommend it.