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Abstract

**Problem-Based Learning and Distance Education**

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Problem-based learning (PBL) has emerged in recent decades as an educational approach that embodies many desirable traits. PBL is attracting increasing attention of proponents of educational reform. A timely question is whether PBL can be implemented meaningfully in distance education.

Even in the way as it is, PBL implementations differ from each other in many respects although they all in one way or the other somehow connect to the central tenet of problem-driven learning. Terminology adopted by practitioners shows the diversity of interpretations, for example, case-based studies, project based learning, and authentic PBL.

Happenings in the present day educational arena are shaped by the diverse belief systems of players. At the ground level the majority of teaching staff believe in coverage of content whereas the society at large seems to believe in examination grades. Leaders, both political and industrial, appear to wish for thinking skills, creativity, and attitudes of quality and life-long-learning to be inculcated in students. Educators with a philosophical bent argue for a shift from the traditional teacher-centred approach of teaching to a learner-centred approach of facilitation. Then there are those who believe that it is perfectly fine if one does not know most of the concepts and methodologies covered in a subject after having scored an "A" for that subject because being able to do well at the examination is all that is needed to demonstrate intellectual ability.

This diversity of beliefs held by parties concerned and the differences in interpretation of the concept of PBL make the issue of PBL in distance education complex. A primary issue of concern to an educator shall be the learning that is meaningful in practice and at the workplace. Such learning is best achieved also in practice and at the workplace. The task of an educational institution then becomes one of preparing individuals such that their learning would be accelerated when engaged in reality. The level of acceleration enabled by education shall therefore be the

gauge of the quality of education. Problem-driven learning in a contextual setting is naturally an effective way of providing the aforementioned preparation for the real world. From a distance education viewpoint, concepts and procedures necessary to understand the real world would have to be the main elements addressed in PBL activities. Formal identification of such concepts and procedures would help in development of learning activities for implementation in distance education. In contrast, other key elements of PBL such as collaborative learning, facilitation by a teacher, and teamwork can be much easily implemented using various Internet technologies.