

The dialectic of Problem-Based Learning in workplace contexts

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The paper discusses Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a mediating factor in generating a variety of learning networks in workplace contexts. We argue that informal learning in experiential circumstances can be systematised to encourage deep learning at the individual and collective level. Given the distinct problem-solving opportunities in PBL, learners can increase their capacity to acquire new knowledge through self-inquiry, reflection and dialogue. The repositioning of learning attitudes also leads to an enlargement of communities of practice wherein double and triple-loop learning cycles intersect to create rigorous learning. We propose an integrated model to explain the dynamics of PBL operating within the constraints of workplace contexts.

Introduction

"It's not that I'm so smart. It's just that I stay with problems longer.... The important thing is not to stop questioning." Albert Einstein.

In the above quote, Einstein expounds two key concepts that are critical to learning and development: *problem solving* and *questioning*. In today's changing times and contexts, people are challenged to approach problems as opportunities for self-inquiry, dialogue and continuous learning. It is through the constant questioning of underlying issues that existing problems hold a great many learning points for the problem solver, essentially the intrinsic learner. Einstein's quote also suggests that learning does not necessarily take place in a formalised and structured manner. For instance, research by Marsick and Watkins (1990) found that only 20 per cent of employees learn from structured training programs. A key discovery is that employees tend to engage in personal strategies to handle daily tasks and challenges. These strategies include questioning, listening, observing, reading and reflecting on their work environment as part of problem solving. Another critical discovery is that about 80 per cent of employees engage in learning through informal means.

Stonyer and Marshall's (2002) study revealed that learning in workplace contexts is largely driven by a community of practice through peer learning