

What would *you* do?

“Problem Based Learning” as a tool to form ethically responsible ministers

Rev Dr Geoff New – ANZAFTE 2019

Introduction – what is PBL?

Ideally, PBL is an open enquiry method which is adopted across the whole curriculum of an educational institution. A case is presented cold to students with no preparation on their part. The best practice of PBL is spread over a series of classroom interactions which allows students time between lectures to enquire and research, and then present their findings in subsequent class times.

Typically the features of PBL are:¹

Students explore real-world, open-ended problems

Learning is largely self-directed, including planning, implementation and evaluation

The activities are usually conducted in small groups

Teachers take the role of facilitators

Learning outcomes emphasise not only content knowledge but also process and learning attitudes

Variations on structuring PBL abound – generally speaking PBL would likely include:²

1. Explore the problem
2. Identify the learning issues
3. Attempt a solution using existing knowledge
4. Identify the learning needs
5. Set goals and allocate tasks
6. Individual study
7. Share with the group
8. Assess and reflect on the process

¹ Natalie Spence, “Can you believe what you read? Science in newspapers” in *How to Apply Active Learning Techniques* ed Stef Savanah and Mitch Parsell (Sydney: Macquarie University, 2013), 13.

² Spence, “Can you believe”, 13 quoting D.R. Woods, *Problem-based Learning: How to gain the most from PBL* (Canada: McMaster University, Woods Publishing).

The use of PBL helps develop particular skills:

*Competences Nurtured by PBL*³

Adapting to and participating in change

Dealing with problems, making reasoned decisions in unfamiliar situations

Reasoning critically and creatively

Adapting a more universal or holistic approach

Practicing empathy, appreciating the other person's point of view

Collaborating productively in groups or teams

Identifying own strengths and weaknesses and undertaking appropriate remediation e.g. through continuing, self-directed learning

Learning about it

At the 2017 Sydney conference of ANZATFE, one of the key-note speakers talked about Problem Based Learning (PBL). He specifically mentioned how the medical profession use PBL in training medical students and that the model has much to endear itself in the training of ministry students. After the conference, I began to research PBL. Fortunately my wife works as the practice manager for Prof Michael Schultz, HOD of the Department of Medicine at Dunedin School of Medicine, University of Otago. He arranged a meeting with his teaching colleague, Dr Steve Johnson, who is particularly adept in the use of PBL. I also sat in on a class of 5th Year medical students where PBL was being used by Prof Schultz and Dr Johnson.

In addition to this, I met with Dr Peter Schwartz who I would describe as the “father of PBL at the Dunedin School of Medicine” He has published and co-authored a number of works on PBL. The effect of this exposure to these various sources was impacting in surprising ways.

- ◆ Dr Schwartz describes PBL as starting with a problem with no other information. It is up to the students with the teachers to identify what they need to know and learn. This includes attitudes as much as knowledge.
- ◆ Dr Schwartz advises that the trick is to design the module so they are learning what you would lecture in any case. He maintains that true PBL happens over an extended time over the whole curriculum across all disciplines.
- ◆ Dr Schwartz was flummoxed that PBL was being considered by someone training ministers. “I don't understand how PBL can be used for ministry training. It's philosophy

³ Charles E. Engel, “Not Just a Method By a Way of Learning” in *The Challenge of Problem-Based Learning 2nd Edition* David Boud and Grahame Feletti (eds) (London: Kogan Page, 1997), 19.

based. There are no right answers. I can't see how PBL can be used!" He believed that what I was proposing was a hybrid between PBL and Case-Based Learning (CBL).

- ◆ Dr Johnson described how he uses PBL to help medical students acknowledge the emotional impact of cases on them. As they work through options and the patient deteriorates, he challenges students by saying, "Yes. But how do you *feel* about that?!" They tend to answer by outlining what they will do but he keeps repeating his question. Eventually they confess to feeling afraid. He responds by saying "And so would I be! Your patient is dying!"
- ◆ When I observed the 5th Year medical class which was being taught by Schultz and Johnson (two gastroenterologists). The class understandably expected the problems they would be engaging with would be centred on gastroenterology. The features of the class were:
 - There was a last-minute change made by Dr Johnson. So Prof Schultz was unfamiliar with the case being presented. He became a co-learner with the class working through the problem with them. The class commented on how much this added to the experience. In a collegial way he worked through the problem with the class. His superior experience and knowledge did not dominate.
 - Related to that – both Johnson and Schultz demonstrated remarkable restraint in not telling the class all they knew; but they eventually told them enough for the students to know what to do.
 - The teaching relationship between the two specialists was excellent. They presented serious material dealt with a light touch without losing the significance of what is being taught.
 - With some of the cases, one of the options for treatment was simply: "reassurance and discharge from your clinic – 'I'll see you in a year.'" This was the correct answer. They went onto to talk about patients' symptoms calming down and they come back in better health. Their experience was that on occasions GP's were referring their patient to a specialist for reassurance: nothing else.
 - The class expected gastroenterology cases. One case was presented with gastro symptoms, but the medical condition was cardiac.
 - There was both a sequential stepping of the main case presented and the agility to go off on tangents. The facilitators had material prepared to resource these tangents. This meant there was a lot of material prepared which might not be used if a particular tangent was not explored.

Why did I use PBL?

When I first I heard PBL described at the 2017 ANZAFTE conference, it immediately resonated with my intuitive approach in teaching ministry interns. One of the modules I teach is entitled “Safe Church.” It is a six-hour module in which I lead interns through a sexual abuse case that happened within the Presbyterian church I ministered in for 17 years.

The case involved a long-standing member who preyed on a victim for six years until she was 12 years of age. She was 17 years old when the abuse came to light. The offender was convicted and imprisoned in 2012. In late 2018 he faced further charges concerning another victim not associated with the church.

I had first taught the module in 2016 before I was aware of PBL. The features of that module were:

- ◆ An ordained minister (PhD in counselling) and I taught the module. My colleague specialises in trauma. She lectures in a theological institution in her field.
- ◆ There were twelve interns in the class.
- ◆ The format the case was presented in was progressive disclosure in a fixed order.⁴ Each event building on the preceding one.
- ◆ The creation of the module was driven by the sequence of events from the case. It was weighted towards rehearsing the story with hoped-for learnings from interns’ engagement with it.
- ◆ The case was punctuated by a mix of narrative, questions (“What would you do at this point?”), discussion, role-play, and close facilitation and guidance by the lecturers.
- ◆ During the class discussion, some responses were found to be combative and superficial. Also, if some stated responses were enacted in a sexual abuse case it would have been criminal. Remedial post-class work was necessary. This is not necessarily a reflection on how the content was taught.
- ◆ Three ministry interns required time with the counsellor at the end of the module. Some of the issues related to interns believing they had not acted ethically with information they held about historical sexual abuse cases.

With this teaching experience in mind, PBL by contrast appeared to provide a clear structure in a messy and emotive scenario. The collection of questions and their arrangement gave a sense of safety. It facilitated involvement *and* detachment.

⁴ This phrase is used to describe a feature of Case Based Learning (CBL) in Malathi Srinivasan, MD, Michael Wilkes, MD, PhD, Frazier Stevenson, MD, Thuan Nguyen, MS, MD, and Stuart Slavin, MD. “Comparing Problem-Based Learning with Case-Based Learning: Effects of a Major Curricular Shift at Two Institutions” in *Academic Medicine* Vol 82, No. 1 (January 2007), 77.

Utilising PBL

The learning outcomes for the module were (as stated in the class handout):

- ◆ For you to be introduced to the issues and implications of sexual abuse
- ◆ For you to engage with a particular case-study so as to highlight general features which may be evident in other contexts
- ◆ For you to begin to formulate and process your response as a minister should you be confronted with such a pastoral event
- ◆ For you to reflect on the pastoral, biblical and theological implications of sexual abuse on individuals, church communities and wider community
- ◆ For you to be orientated to leadership issues when required to guide others (including fellow leaders) through serious pastoral crises
- ◆ For you to identify three areas you are *committed* to developing/clarifying to enhance your pastoral leadership in situations such as these

I settled on a hybrid of two PBL approaches to structure the class:

1. O-T-Q⁵

- ◆ **O:** Observe objectively
- ◆ **T:** Think reflectively
- ◆ **Q:** Question frequently

I decided to use O-T-Q as an introductory exercise to the case.

2. KWHLAQ⁶

- ◆ **K:** What do we think we already **Know** about the subject?
- ◆ **W:** What do we **Want/Need** to find out about it?
- ◆ **H:** **How** and where will we search for answers? How will we organize our investigations (e.g. time, access to resources, and reporting)?
- ◆ **L:** What do we expect to **Learn?** What have we **Learned?**

⁵ John Barell, *Problem-Based Learning: An Inquiry Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2007), 7.

⁶ Barell, *Problem*, 6 drawing on D Olge, "K-W-L: A teaching model that develops active reading of expository text", *Reading Teacher* (1986), 39, pp 564-571 and John Barell, *Teaching for Thoughtfulness* (2nd ed) (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1995).

- ◆ **A:** How will we **Apply** what we have learned to other subjects? To our personal lives? To our next projects?
- ◆ **Q:** What new **Questions** do we have following our inquiry?

For the major parts of the case I split KWHLAQ. I used KWH for most of the case and reserved LAQ for the final time of reflection.

3. What Actually Happened (WAH)

My plan was to punctuate the case study with the disclosure of what actually happened (WAH) in the situation. However, I was concerned about the timing and impact of this information. Would it shut down enquiry and exploration of the case? Would it drown out the contributions of the group?

The practice of including what actually happened within a PBL framework is modelled in the publication *Problem-Based Learning: Case Studies, Experience and Practice*.⁷

I included material of “What actually happened” after each iteration of KWH.

At its simplest, the case-study was presented in stages and an element was presented and then the class engaged in:

- a) KWH
 - ◆ What do we know?
 - ◆ What do we want/need to find out?
 - ◆ How/where will we search for answers?

- b) WAH
 - ◆ What actually happened

- c) LAQ in the last part of the module:
 - ◆ What have we learnt?
 - ◆ How will you apply it?
 - ◆ What questions do you carry?

⁷ Peter Schwartz, Stewart Mennin and Graham Webb (eds), *Problem-Based Learning: Case Studies, Experience and Practice* (London: Kogan Page, 2001).

The Overall Shape of the Module

The module was arranged in the following order:

Session 1: The allegations

O-T-Q

The module began by presenting the case. There were thirteen interns in the class. The initial presentation was limited to articulating the allegations made by the victim, the physical and emotional state she was in, and the identity (pseudonym) and profile of the alleged offender.

A whiteboard exercise was then conducted with the whole class. This was for the purpose of gently orientating them to the style of engagement they would be involved in for the rest of the day. The instructions were:

Observe: what do you notice/observe about this situation?

What do you see and hear?

Observe – don't infer. Don't draw conclusions yet; look for facts.

Think: relate what you observe *to what you already know* about these kinds of situations.

What do you know and recall that helps your engagement with this situation?

What similarities and differences do you notice between what you have just observed; and what you have experienced or remembered about other situations?

Question: what questions arise for you as you form your response/plan of action?

What don't you know?

What questions arise from the exercise of comparing your previous knowledge/experience to this new situation?

Session 2: The police investigation and pastoral response

This session focused on the police being unable to proceed to prosecution as the victim was unable to go through the interview. The alleged offender was unaware of the investigation. The case is presented that a meeting with the alleged offender needs to take place:

KWH

- ◆ What do we already know (your own knowledge and skills) that will help us plan for the meeting?
- ◆ What do we need to ask/determine about this situation before we meet with the alleged offender?
- ◆ How do we find those answers in time?

WAH

- ◆ The class is told that the offender confesses in the meeting and the police can now proceed towards prosecution.

Session 3: Informing the congregation and organising pastoral care

This session focuses on how to inform the congregation and arranging a pastoral care strategy for all involved.

Again, KWH and WAH are employed.

Session 4: Living in the aftermath

This session concentrated on the time after the offender was released from prison and his request to return to the congregation.

KWH and WAH were employed.

This session also had the added questions of LAQ:

LAQ

- ◆ **Learning:** What are you learning? What have you learnt about dealing with a case of sexual abuse?
- ◆ **Answers:** How will you apply what you have learnt to other ministry situations?
- ◆ **Questions:** What new questions are you now carrying?

Observations on the use of PBL

The first session detailed the allegations of the sexual abuse and the interns engaged with this material by utilising O-T-Q. By the first break my co-lecturer (the counsellor) was being approached by interns about situations they had been aware of or involved in relating to whether to speak up or not. By the end of the module, half the class had sought her out for intentional

conversations and help. Most of the conversations related to pastoral and leadership situations where the intern was aware of information but had remained silent. Most of the situations did not relate to sexual abuse cases.

I discovered that the PBL questions (especially KWH) had an ambiguity about them. They were intended as the guiding questions for the class time – yet they also presented as questions which can be employed in real-time in a live pastoral context. This ambiguity was powerful. The questions helped the real-world feel.

Notwithstanding the power of the questions, as the module progressed I found that the interns' responses to "What do you need to know?" and "How will you find it?" began to lack depth. The interns began to settle into the same response (e.g. contact the denominational leader who provides guidance on such cases). A contributing factor to this may have been the lack of time and ability to research answers. So it became an exercise which was too contained within the group and physical space. In future, I would prepare more extensively so that there were more avenues and time for interns to research the questions.

Yet this aspect of the module led to an unexpected learning space.

I had deliberately delayed in describing WAH to the class. I did not want to unduly influence the interns' reflection of KWH. I expected two main spaces to open up in the class:

1. Presenting the next element of the case
2. The interns' response to KWH

However, as the case was presented, the class tired of KWH and wanted WAH sooner. I relented and discovered they had created a third space.

3. Bringing KWH to bear on WAH.

Rather than shutting the interns down, WAH injected life into their KWH reflection. Rather than WAH proving to be the last word on the issue, it provided material for them to critique, reflect and wrestle with their own responses. They were unfazed by WAH in terms of being intimidated by actual events. It was here that they reflected on their own intended practice, past experience and compared that to what actually happened. They subjected WAH to critique as well.

With is in mind, in future, I would trim the time spent on KWH and enter the third space sooner.

I left LAQ as the last exercise of the module. By then there was not a lot of energy left in the room or time. The case study had been emotionally, spiritually and mentally demanding. The responses lacked depth. Nevertheless, the main learning was that interns were applying the exercise latitudinally to ministry contexts. In future I intend to dedicate more time to LAQ and possibly include it in early parts of the module.

With the structure of PBL, I found the scenario was more contained and considered in its presentation. In contrast to the previous time I taught it, it was not so sprawling and

overwhelming. Yet none of the significance and weight of the case study was lost. There was a new focus and intentionality which is surprising given that PBL allows for the exploration of unexpected trajectories and tangents of enquiry.

One intern disengaged from the class given the topic. This intern left the class for most of the module. This would have happened regardless of the method of teaching. However, this necessitated remedial work to be conducted with that intern post-module.

There is one last aspect which bears relating. At one point in the module when I was describing what actually happened, I broke down when describing the moment when I confronted the offender with the allegations. In the moment when I was overwhelmed in the retelling, my co-lecturer took control and who would not allow the class to move quickly past what was happening. A number of the class were weeping: she asked – “what do you see?”

For me the surprise was that the majority of comments centred on the fact that I did not let the issue lie once the Police had decided not to proceed. In the midst of the emotion, they singled out the determination to pursue the issue and not to let it go. They clearly had in mind situations they were personally aware of.

Did I actually do PBL?

Dr Schwartz’s observation that I am doing a hybrid of PBL and CBL has substance.

Differences between PBL and CBL⁸

	PBL Open enquiry approach ⁹	CBL Guided enquiry approach ¹⁰
Initial Topic		
Student	Unknown	General content disclosed
Lecturer	Full case disclosure	Full case disclosure
Preparation		
Student	No advance preparation	Some/lots of advance prep
Faculty	Lots of advance prep	Lots of advance prep
Control		
Student	Directs discussion	Provides some direction
Lecturer	Provides no direction	Provides some direction
Data seeking		
Student	Lots of additional data sought during/after case	Some additional data sought during/after case
Lecturer	Some additional data sought during/after case	No additional data sought during/after case

⁸ Srinivasan et al., "Comparing", 75. In the article this information is depicted on a spectrum. I have adapted the comparisons in this chart form.

⁹ Srinivasan et al., "Comparing", 75.

¹⁰ Srinivasan et al., "Comparing", 74.

On reflection and considering these emphases of PBL and CBL, I concede that as Dr Schwartz predicted; I was conducting a hybrid of PBL-CBL:

Summary of the Shape of my “Safe Church” Module

	PBL	CBL
Initial Topic		
Student	Unknown	
Lecturer	Full case disclosure	
Preparation		
Student	No advance preparation	
Faculty	Lots of advance prep	
Control		
Student	Directs discussion	Provides some direction
Lecturer		Provides some direction
Data seeking		
Student		Some additional data sought during/after case
Lecturer		No additional data sought during/after case

In future, I will endeavour to make the problem/case more open-ended and unstructured. This will mean relinquishing my hold on the narrative and the memory of it. The WAH phase will be retained but presented in a way so that it does not serve as the next phase of the case. That it instead serves as a resource. The way the interns engaged with WAH and creating a third space defines how best to use it.

On Reflection . . .

In seeking metaphors and analogies to describe the differences between PBL and CBL, I offer these reflections:

If the case study was . . .	PBL	CBL
Drama	Improvisation theatre Breaking the 4 th wall	Watching a movie and pausing it to discuss
Scripture	Wisdom literature Parable	Prophetic literature Epistle
Sermon	Inductive marked by questions and invitation	Deductive marked by illustration and application

PBL or CBL? A final observation¹¹

In the early 2000's a study was conducted in two Californian University medical schools surveying perceptions concerning the move made from PBL to CBL. The results were that students and faculty “overwhelmingly preferred the CBL method.”¹² However, the researchers made an astute observation about the findings that can be applied to training for Christian ministry:

Why did these students prefer the CBL over PBL? Did they eschew the fully open inquiry method of PBL? Our findings indicate that the determinants of student preference for the CBL format were related to perceptions of efficient use of time, not an opposition to open inquiry. Medical learners are operating in a time-pressured setting, in which learners are multitasking clinical, academic, and personal responsibilities—often in excess of 60 to 80 hours a week. The lack of closure of the PBL method, with additional work between cases, and exploration of blind alleys, seemed like busy work to the learners—as opposed to free exploration and inquiry. Student presentations were often inefficient, and some presented inaccurate or incomplete information on their topics. The open inquiry method is also not mirrored in the clinical arena, where the learners develop a sound clinical approach with guidance from faculty and more senior learners. It may be that more advanced learners (who have the context for their work already developed) or a subset of early learners might benefit more from a process of open inquiry in a time-limited context.

¹¹ Srinivasan et al., “Comparing”, 74. The researchers make the observation that their research could not assess which method produces better physicians.

¹² Srinivasan et al., “Comparing”, 78.

Applying their observations to the training of ministers:

- ◆ PBL is demanding on students. Like the medical students mentioned in the study, time pressure and multi-tasking is an oft-mentioned issue for ministry interns. The time and space need to be carefully engineered so that students will engage in the exercise.
- ◆ Therefore, employing PBL in a time-limited context is a preferred option but requires more planning, preparation, resources and anticipation on the part of the lecturer.
- ◆ In contrast to medical clinical conditions – the pastoral context does mirror the open enquiry method. Hence, PBL can reveal, if not expose, the presence or absence of ethical practice and guidelines in the students' practice.