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No problem with teaching? Maybe that's your problem

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ABSTRACT

A reflection on the experience of a professional broadcaster who has transitioned into university teaching, with a particular examination of the role of PBL (problem-based learning) and its value as an approach in general to undergraduate education, but in particular to professional communication instruction.

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If you have taught in the communication field or indeed if you have invested significant time and money in its study, you get it: In this field you learn by doing, and cannot keep doing it unless you keep learning. Increasingly in my own Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia (CSMM) at McMaster University – as in many other schools across Canada and around the world – we apply a range of more active learning methods, including problem-based learning (PBL). PBL was pioneered as an approach to medical training in a “new” McMaster University Medical School in 1969¹. The method then spread widely into the sciences and engineering. Only more recently in Canadian universities has PBL moved more into communication programs that are housed in humanities and social sciences faculties.

PBL is “any learning environment in which the problem drives the learning” (CLL, 2012). This builds upon the pedagogical understanding that students are motivated to develop insight and skills not so much to pass tests as to resolve and improve real situations since “problems themselves appeal to the human

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desire for resolution and harmony” (CLL, 2012). PBL inculcates an approach to life-long learning – since problems continue to change – and a plasticity to build new types of learning into changing practice. It is well suited to teaching professional communication, in part due to the mixed professional/pedagogical background of many of our colleagues.

I started teaching at McMaster University in 2005 after twenty years in the professional communication world. Most of that was at the CBC managing audience research and strategic planning for radio and TV services, although I had been doing a PhD part-time at York University from 2000. I was finding in my CBC management role that the most interesting approaches to developing staff competencies in the changing digital media environments were not knowledge and skills creation so much as mentoring and team building.

Like many new professors, I spent the summer before entering the lecture halls frantically gathering knowledge in various fields such as communication research methodologies, Canadian media policy, political-economic audience theory, amongst others. They were all now tidily and exhaustively gathered into dense lecture notes that I would “download” to the students, so that I might then examine them on their “information capture” in papers and exams. In other words I was making my own mastery of the field problem-free, avoiding the embarrassment of not knowing all the material in front of the students. Only when a guest lecturer came to talk and she started with problems rather than answers, did I realize the value of PBL for myself.

Trina McQueen, then CTV Visiting Professor of Broadcasting Management in the Schulich School of Business’s Arts and Media program at York University in Toronto, came to my Media Law and Policy class, turned off the power point and said to the students: “Let’s talk about the five most interesting problems I had in my 35 years as TV journalist and executive.” One of the most interesting problems was her last: how to schedule “The Sopranos” in early 2000 when CTV picked up the Canadian rights. The program’s high level of violence was still considered unsettling and controversial, and potentially a public relations nightmare. This was a real problem. The irony was delightful: It was not the university lecturers I had recently joined that taught me this important lesson about problem-based learning, but rather a person who had been a groundbreaking CBC journalist and successful CTV executive.

I now put problems at the heart of my courses. In our quantitative and

¹“The approach taken by the (Medical School) planning group... was to stay away from the standard building-block structure, where a lot of content is shoved down the throats of the students, which they do not retain anyway, and adopt a system where students are actively engaged in the learning process” (Lee and Kwan, 1997).

qualitative research methodologies classes, students work with community groups and their real problems. The students learn the methods to help solve real-world problems, such as evaluating the communication effectiveness of local environmental groups' educational and promotional campaigns. In my media law and policy class we do policy research in which we appear before regulatory and legislative bodies with real policy briefs and interventions. It takes a lot of work and preparation – by myself and, more importantly, by the students. There is an obvious tension; will we learn enough in 3-4 months to be prepared for a presentation to a school board or major regulatory body? In the end, it is the tension that spurs a desire for a resolution that most often leads to growth and understanding.

I'd be interested in hearing from other professional communication teachers who have these kinds of problems. I know some JPC readers are part of an interesting arrays of applied communication programs at universities and colleges around the world. How effective are we as a group of instructors in practicing what we preach: applying our learning in the profession to turning problems in the classroom into solutions with our students for organizations and communities? What are your problems? How do they provide a learning solution?

Communication programs in universities and colleges across Canada and around the world are growing, as are the need and the opportunities for new instructors. Many professionals are taking advantage of new graduate programs to help prepare them for teaching. However, the transition from work to school is often difficult for those who bridge the two worlds, and we struggle to appear suitably "academic" and "class-room ready." The problem-based-learning (PBL) approach in our instructional roles fits our natural tendency to take situations of change and uncertainty, and literally turn them into teaching and learning moments. It turns out what our professional instincts are often telling us is telling us is also good pedagogy.

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