



Chapter IV

The Tutor's Role

Introduction

Traditionally, learning has been dominated by explanation and by organisation of a body of knowledge. A typical mode of learning is that the teacher initiates the question, generally aimed at getting the student to display his or her knowledge. The student then responds and the teacher evaluates the response. The aim is often focused on having students learn facts. In PBL, learning is said to be student-centered, with students driving the discussion and teacher serving as guide on the side. Two essential factors that affect the success of a PBL curriculum are: the tutor's understanding of the educational theories underlying PBL and the group process in the tutorial. Understanding the role of teacher in student-centered learning is important in being able to implement PBL effectively. The facilitatory skills of the teacher are central to the success of PBL. This chapter describes the role of the tutor in PBL. It begins with a brief review of factors such as commitment, resources, design of a good problem or trigger, and assessment of learning. Subsequent sections of the chapter are devoted to the role of the tutorial. This includes skills that a good tutor should possess in order to implement PBL effectively.

Role of Tutor

We can sum up the skills of a good tutor into two sets of skills. The first set of skills consists of the step-by-step procedure of the tutorial process within a small group setting. A good tutor must have the skills to ensure that all students are involved in the discussion. He or she must keep the discussion focused on the problem, help students to avoid conflict, give time for students to think, and allow time to answer questions. Second, the tutor must have the necessary skills to foster thinking and metacognitive processes in students. Tutors should assist students to acquire problem solving or reasoning skills by encouraging them to hypothesise, justify, experiment, and question their reasoning processes (Mayo & Donnelly, 1995).

We believe that there are several important factors that should be considered for the role of the tutor. These include commitment, provision of resources, design of good problems or triggers, assessment of learning, and the tutorial role. Each of these will be discussed.

Commitment

The first issue concerns the commitment of the tutor. Tutors should first ensure that they have the commitment to devote the time to the tutorial process for each of the groups taking the PBL. Students have the tendency to work out whether or not the teacher is truly committed to PBL. If the teacher is motivated and committed, then he or she would take the students with him or her. Even the least motivated and skeptical students will be won over if the teacher can show that it is for their benefit that he or she undertakes the PBL tasks. Show your students that you are enjoying doing PBL. It is important to make your students know that you are keen for them to learn. The tutor should join in as part of the learning community with the students. To help students to know that you are not trying to intimidate them by challenging them with difficult and thought provoking questions, show your excitement with them as they begin to develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. A good tutor is interested in how the students study, wants to understand the problems students have, and tries to help the students to learn better.

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