

# Impact on Learner Experience: A Qualitative Case Study Exploring Online MBA Problem-Based Learning Courses

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative case study investigated how the integration of a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) curriculum in an online MBA program impacted the learner experience. The learner experience included three stances created by Savin-Baden (2000); personal, pedagogical and interactional. The overarching theme was to examine the experiences of eight learners all in different PBL courses. The primary research question was: How does problem-based learning (PBL) impact the learner experience? Purposeful sampling, specifically multiple variation sampling was chosen. The data was collected in accordance with Yin's (2003) five key components derived from documentation, archival records and interviews. The variety of data collection methods served to triangulate sources corroborating findings and offsetting the pitfalls of any one given method. Data analysis consisted of the constant comparison method using NVivo7 as the primary data management tool. Key findings correlated with the Savin-Baden (2000) study revealing how the stances were interdependent upon one another. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]*

*Keywords: Learner's Experience; MBA Program; Online Curriculum; Problem-Based Learning*

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## INTRODUCTION

Learner experience (Savin-Baden, 2000) was defined as a way to research learners in a unique context and understand how the learners view themselves

in that context. The learner experience also investigates students' experiences in relation to the MBA Problem-Based Learning (PBL) courses as a new paradigm in research that illuminates people and lives as three-dimensional not just

as human subjects without history or a future. This qualitative case study included three stances created by Savin-Baden (2000); personal, pedagogical and interactional.

A stance is the sense of one's attitude, belief or disposition towards a particular context, person or experience (Savin-Baden, 2000, p.56). Personal stance was defined in the Savin-Baden (2000) study as "the way in which staff and students see themselves in relation to the learning context and give their own distinctive meaning to their experience of that context" (p.55). Pedagogical stance was defined in the Savin-Baden (2000) study as "the ways in which people see themselves as learners in particular educational environments" (p.55). Finally, interactional stance was also defined in the Savin-Baden (2000) study as "the ways in which learners work and learn in groups and construct meaning in relation to one another" (p.56).

The overarching theme was to examine the experiences of eight learners all in different BPL courses and at different stages in an online MBA program (the beginning, the middle and at the end of the program). The Primary research question was: How does problem-based learning (PBL) in online MBA courses impact the learner experience? The four secondary questions were:

1. How do learners view themselves in relation to the learning context? (Personal Stance)
2. How do learners give unique meaning to their experience within the learning context? (Personal Stance)
3. How do learners perceive themselves in the online MBA PBL course? (Pedagogical Stance)
4. How do learners work and learn in groups and construct meaning in relation to one another? (Interactional Stance)

## PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as related to online graduate business and management courses was valuable to study as most research to date has been primarily collected from the medical profession. Evidence does exist that there is a growing interest for more research into the benefits of PBL across other curricula. The Academy Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business' new standards for accreditation looks more specifically at learning outcomes as the basis of continuous improvement in management education (Coombs & Elden, 2004).

Based on the new standards for accreditation, Coombs and Elden (2004) expect more research as necessary to support PBLs expansion. The authors continued by offering advice on critical areas in need of further studies. Among the many needs uncovered, PBL experts discussed the need for more research into the learner experience. Much of the literature in this area offers recom-

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