

## Case Study Template : Suggested Headings (please amend as necessary to fit your case study)



# Introduction of Problem Based Learning to students of POLIS

## Author and Affiliation

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## Abstract

Brief description of the contents of the case study

The case intended to introduce the method of Problem Based Learning (PBL) to final years students of the module 'Britain and the EU'. The central idea of the teaching method was to use the challenges of the bilateral relationship between the UK and the EU as a vehicle to promote student learning of theories and of historical facts as opposed to direct presentation of information and concepts. PBL offered the opportunity to students to work in groups for evaluating research materials. The coursework was based on real problems of the bilateral relationship between the UK and the EU, in order to enhance students' critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities and to prepare them for tasks that are asked by their future recruiters.

## 1. Background

Reasons (including context) for doing what you have done. Previous experience and knowledge of students, if relevant. Preparation required for staff, students and the environment.

The introduction of PBL was based on the successful implementation of the new learning method to second year students of the module 'The EU'. As a module coordinator I was trained in PBL at the University of Maastricht in 2014. Since then, I have applied PBL in the University of Maastricht and during my stay in Turkey for Antalya Bilim University. In both universities PBL was welcomed by students of different levels. In addition, these experiences helped me to understand how students from different backgrounds adopt and perform when this new approach is introduced.

## 2. Methodology

Give a description of what you have done and what the results were.

The introduction of PBL required the reconstruction of the syllabus and a new approach in the class. The PBL syllabus includes short tasks, puzzles or problem descriptions in order to actively engage students in knowledge construction and to encourage them to independently decide about the relevant questions and concepts that must be used to solve each week's research problem.

Each week students followed an one-hour lecture (given by the instructor) and a two-hour seminar. The seminars are divided in two parts: the pre- and post-discussion. The seminar for Week 1 had only a post-discussion, which is organised as a normal discussion about the key components of the week's topic.

The pre-discussion takes up at least 45-50 minutes of the second part of the seminar discussion. The pre-discussion in the seminar for Week 1 covered the topic of Week 2. Accordingly the pre-discussion during the seminar of Week 2 covered the topic of Week 3. This logic was followed for all the topics of the module.

During the pre-discussion students are expected to define the problem statement, which is meant to identify a puzzle and a title for the post-discussion. Following the definition of the problem statement students brainstormed and identified what they know, what they assume and what they want to explore in order to solve the puzzle. The short passages that are assigned for each topic contribute to the brainstorming and provide assumptions to different aspects of the problem statement. Students are in charge of defining the learning goals for each seminar discussion. The learning objectives constitute the joint agreement of the group about the research steps that are needed in order to investigate the puzzle until the post-discussions. Mostly those were specific questions, but also specific tasks that the organisers of each seminar (two students) set for the group.

During the post-discussion (which occurs in the first part of the seminar that follows the lecture for the same topic and it lasts about an hour) students exchange their research results about the problem statement and reflect on the previously agreed research process. During the post-discussion they also exchanged additional sources and materials that they found. The organisers of the seminar post-discussion coordinate the whole process.

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A chair and secretary for at least one topic were allocated in the first class. The role of the chair is to coordinate the discussion and the secretary to assist this role. The secretary acts as a note-taker during the pre-discussion and is responsible for putting all the ideas on the whiteboard.

As a result of this approach students felt that they had more ownership of the learning objectives. This motivated them to participate more in the class. In addition, students improved their organisation skills and ability to prepare analytical questions.

### 3. Issues

Describe the issues and barriers faced and how you overcame them, or what might help to overcome them?

The introduction of PBL faced the following issues/barriers:

- Unfamiliarity with the new learning process: Students are taught in the traditional way (lecture/seminar) and often they expect the teacher to provide certain questions for each topic (and often the right answers). In order to help them construct their own goals and research questions, the lecturer offered help, especially in the first seminars and explained how analytical questions are made and the limits of their analysis within one seminar hour.
- Confusion over pre- and post-discussions: Students usually approach the seminars as open discussions and some come unprepared to classes. The lecturer explained the different structure in the first lecture and seminar and he encouraged students to take notes, photos of the whiteboard in order to help them construct their solutions to the research puzzle.
- Online classes: This year the module was delivered entirely online. In order to facilitate the discussion between the students, the module leader often assisted the discussion by taking notes and by using modern technologies (e.g. a pad) in order to imitate the physical class environment and for writing notes on the whiteboard.
- Open-ended discussions: In multistage learning processes students are often inclined to make generic observations (especially when they have not consulted relevant sources/bibliography). The lecturer helped students to stay committed to the solution of the problem and not to derail from the framework that they designed.

### 4. Benefits

What specific strategies or approaches were particularly successful?

The following strategies were particularly successful:

- Research problems motivated students to seek a deeper understanding of concepts/theories and to interpret historical facts.
- The coursework imitated a real challenge for policymakers and helped students to make reasoned decisions and to defend them.
- The class discussions were about complex problems, which ensured that students must work together in order to solve them.

### 5. Evidence of Success (if available)

Impact on the student learning experience?

Student perspective

After discussions with his probation advisor, the lecturer prepared a questionnaire for students in order to assess their learning experience and to what extent PBL helped them to understand better the content of the module. The questionnaire shows the (very) positive impact PBL had on students' learning experience (see attached documents).

### 6. How Can Other Academics Reproduce This?

How can other staff/trainers/instructors reproduce this technique/method? What is its applicability to other disciplines and contexts? What are the limiting factors?

PBL was first introduced in medical studies in the late 1960s and a few decades later to the study of law. As it follows the rationale that knowledge is context dependent and should be constructed; instead of 'just' transferring knowledge passively from professor to student in a lecture, it can be applied in other disciplines. The university must provide training to faculty members, who wish to adopt this teaching approach. As I was the point of reference for the inclusion of PBL in other universities, I am willing to share my experience and knowledge about this method.

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The university can also invite other scholars (my network can assist this) for introducing PBL to other academics from different disciplines. The only limiting factor is that PBL requires a three hour session (one-hour lecture and two-hour seminar).

### 7. Reflections

Any other factors which you consider contributed to the success or otherwise of your case study. If you had to do it all again would you do anything differently?  
What recommendations are there for improved practice?  
What should be explored next?

Below you can find some recommendations for improved practice:

- Ensure that the suggested research puzzles incorporate the content objectives in such a way as to connect it to previous courses/knowledge.
- Module leaders should think in advance what resources will the students need and make sure that the reading list is updated and reflects the learning objectives. Students need to learn to identify and utilize learning resources on their own, but it can be helpful if the instructor indicates a few good sources to get them started. Many students will want to limit their research to the Internet, so it will be important to guide them towards the library as well.
- Periodic seminars for explaining PBL to faculty members can be used as platforms for exchanging views/experiences.

### 8. References (if available)

How can other staff/trainers/instructors reproduce this technique/method? What is its applicability to other disciplines and contexts? What are the limiting factors?

Below you can find some references about the use of PBL in other universities:

At Maastricht University: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMtLXXf9Sko>

At Aalborg University: <https://www.en.aau.dk/about-aau/aalborg-model-problem-based-learning/>;  
<https://www.pbl.aau.dk/?page=1>