

Problem Based Learning (PBL): Reporting an experience with undergraduate occupational therapy students from a public university in Brazil

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Introduction: Problem Based Learning (PBL) was introduced as a new learning methodology at McMaster University in Canada in the 1960's. Since then, PBL became an important alternative to traditional education models, and several universities around the world have courses oriented by this methodology. In Brazil, PBL has been introduced in some medical programs, but it is still not very well known.

Objectives: to report an experience of using PBL in one of the courses of the undergraduate Occupational Therapy program at the Federal University of Minas Gerais - Brazil.

Description/report: On the second semester of 2007, the discipline "Clinical reasoning in Occupational Therapy for Children" was offered to undergraduate students. The course was based in case studies and its aim was to develop the student's clinical reasoning to conduct occupational therapy programs for children. The course's goal was to prepare the students for clinical practice, by helping them to gather and summarize information as a means to choose the most appropriate procedures to evaluate and intervene in different scenarios.

Results/Discussion: Thirteen students volunteered to participate in the course; they were divided in two tutorial groups, each one tutored by a graduate student in Rehabilitation Sciences (AAC and CBR), and both oriented by a professor (LCM). At the beginning, the students had difficulties with the new methodology, because they were not used to some PBL's features, such as the learner-centered focus and the acquisition of new knowledge through self-directed learning. Throughout the semester, the students showed more independent performance and reported greater learning than with the traditional education methods.

Conclusion: PBL is an important alternative to traditional educational methods, but it requires appropriate physical structure as well as a number of tutors, conditions that are difficult in a Brazilian public university. However, if it is not possible to construct the whole curriculum based on PBL, this experience shows that this methodology can be used successfully in just some courses.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: PBL seems to be a good strategy to teach the occupational therapy students to develop life-long learning skills, to think critically and reason clinically.