
A tip for problem-based learning facilitators: never sit at the head of the table

Un conseil pour les facilitateurs de l'apprentissage par problèmes : ne jamais s'asseoir à la tête de la table

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I am fascinated by the power of problem-based learning (PBL). I have been a PBL facilitator for over two decades and have facilitated sessions in Nepal, the Caribbean and Malaysia. A PBL facilitator is not an information provider and despite PBL now being an established learning method many faculty still find this role transition from an information provider to a facilitator challenging. Many students also continue to look to the faculty for answers. In most of Asia schooling is still traditional and students are used to faculty as information providers.

The design of the PBL rooms needs more attention. A major problem according to me is the use of rectangular tables. This creates a clear head of the table, and most faculty members usually sit at the head. This is not conducive to the PBL process. If you sit at the head of the table students will continue to look to you for answers and directions rather than working out the processes themselves reverting to the 'sage on the stage' scenario.

The best table for PBLs would be a round table without a clearly defined head and no obvious power differential. A study examined whether round or rectangular tables are better for collaborative tasks (1). The authors concluded that use of round tables led to higher levels of participation among elementary school students but the impact on university students was limited. In Asia there is a clear power differential between teachers and students and group work is less common.

A round table big enough to seat all group members comfortably would be ideal. A quiet room with a door that can be closed with resources for interaction and collaboration is required. If a round table is not available avoid sitting at the head of the table. Sitting among students at a round table leads to enriching and stimulating group work and discussions!

Reference

1. Vujovic M, Hernández-Leo D, Tassani S, Spikol D. Round or rectangular tables for collaborative problem solving? A multimodal learning analytics study. *British J Educ Tech*. 2020;51(5):1597-614. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12988>