

# USING PBL IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION STUDIES

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to briefly describe how PBL and other active learning methods can reinforce student's understanding of Public Administration studies. This method will help student to achieve the necessary practical experience by focusing on real cases and solving real problems to have a deep understanding of all the processes that occur at the local and at the central level of public administration. This kind of approach will enhance the development of some fundamental competencies, such as: problem solving skills, better understanding of real projects, critical thinking, team work and team leadership etc. The current model of the study programmes in Public Administration do not correspond to the Labor market requests and sometimes includes disciplines that do not focus on the development of core skills and competencies. The transition from the traditional teaching methods to a new model of student centered learning method will help to strengthen overall management objectives of higher education, opening the way for competitive services, managing to contribute to the transition to the knowledge economy.

**Keywords:** active learning, teaching methods, skills, competencies, learning outcomes, Public Administration.

The modern Higher Education System has a strong connection to research and it is oriented to the employment of all the graduates of these institutions. Each member of the academic community should be concerned about the implementation of the university's mission and vision in everyday life. Using innovative teaching methods including the widespread use of ICT is part of the strategy of higher education institutions, as these methods benefit both to the higher education system in general and to academic staff and students in particular.

A modern higher education institution emphasizes on the introduction of innovative teaching methods in the educational process. The correct mixture of traditional and innovative methods of training contributes to the development of cognitive interests and creative abilities of students, promotes their preparation for practical work. In a society that is changing so fast, where the competition becomes stronger day by day, the lack of practical experience and skills of a potential graduate can be a serious and significant obstacle to their employment and career growth. With regard to this, in the last period are becoming more popular some modern teaching methods, aimed to develop students' specific skills. By using a variety of new techniques, it facilitates to improve the development process of the material, also, it teaches students to think and how to apply the knowledge gained in the lectures. This knowledge is often much theorized and it takes a lot before the graduate can apply it in "real world". In this article we will try to describe how the method of problem-based learning and other active-learning methods contribute to a better understanding of the disciplines of the Public Administration program and how can be applied the acquired knowledge in practice.

Problem-based learning – is model that organize learning around project.<sup>52</sup>

Problem-based learning, as well as other Active Learning teaching methodology is an innovative method, whose principle is student-centered learning. In this process, students are

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<sup>52</sup> A review on research on problem based learning, John W. Thomas, 2000, p. 2

involved in various activities that promote analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information obtained in class. The activities are carried out under the umbrella-shaped content and consist mainly of the following:

- Simulations;
- Group projects;
- Formulation of a problem;
- Research projects;
- Case studies.

In general, the teamwork and the group activities are essential throughout the study period. Referring to the problem it should be with a complex and reflective content. The simulated situation should be very connected to the real world and it is more important how students are going to implement their theoretical knowledge than the result they are going to obtain. That is why it should be a balance between the learning outcomes in the sense of their content and of the process, how they are achieved. The authors Alexia Papageorgiou, Peter McCrorie, Stelios Georgiades and Maria Perdikogianni, the authors of the book *Psychology for Psychologists: A Problem Based Approach to Undergraduate Psychology Teaching*<sup>53</sup> affirm that the modern teaching method is superior to the traditional one, but it has different obstacles during the implementation. The orientation towards process versus the orientation to outcomes is one of the main challenge of this method.

The group activities are carried out in several stages, with the participation of the professor. The first stage is planning which takes place in the following manner: the selection of the members of the team and the distribution of the tasks. The second stage is the group monitoring, taking place in the following manner: the coordination of the individual's contribution, discussions, debates and negotiations and finally the drafting of the report or of the mini-project. The third stage is dedicated to the assessment, conducted in an original manner: the peer review and the assessment how the tasks were accomplished. The assessment is an aspect that differs when a professor uses a traditional approach to teaching and when he uses active methods in teaching. In Active Learning is not important the result, is more important the methods one chose to get to this result. As Bloom's Taxonomy establishes a learner should: apply (execute and implement), analyze (differentiate, organize and attribute), evaluate (check and critique) and create (generate, plan and produce). These are the key competencies and the job description for a future public servant.

These should be the learning outcomes should be obtained by the learners. A professor should focus on the following aspects if he aims to a successful teaching:

- The dynamic of the group is of a great importance;
- To explain during the seminars which is the path to get over to certain decisions;
- To challenge to think about how to get over to certain decisions;
- There is no correct answer, but the rationale how someone got over to a certain answer;
- Simulations are more structured then the case studies;
- An innovative approach to teaching and spreading the use of ICT in teaching.

For a result oriented teaching and knowledge transfer process, a professor from Public Administration program should challenge students to use the tools offered by ICT. Also,

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<sup>53</sup> *Psychology for Psychologists: A Problem Based Approach to Undergraduate Psychology Teaching/* edited by Alexia Papageorgiou, Peter McCrorie, Stelios Georgiades and Maria Perdikogianni, p. 36

modern and innovative teachers should use new teaching methods in order for their teaching to become more active. For example, the use of the Adobe Connect Platform, Moodle and a new and interactive assessment method called Kahhot! It is generally accepted that the problem is the starting point of the learning process of students. It can be both theoretical and practical and its typology can be authentic or can have scientific and multidisciplinary approach. This teaching philosophy is based on the following principles:

- The organizational framework of the PBL methodology is always based on project. The purpose of a project is always defined by the formulation of the problem;

- To accomplish a project students need fundamental, theoretical knowledge, which can be get only during the courses, seminars etc., because he theory is studied for a better understanding of practical things;

- Teamwork and cooperation represents the motive power of Active learning methods and especially of PBL, because students work in groups, where an individual's activity contribute to an overall result and differences generate creativity;

- The project enhances student's competencies, mainly focusing on professional development, because the problem of a project should be close to a practical situation;

- Students are responsible themselves for their learning outcomes. They organize their activities independently and they are guided by a supervisor. The presumption of the model is: students are eager to learn, otherwise they will not succeed.<sup>54</sup>

How to organize a project at the subject taught at Public Administration (e.g. Labor Law):

1. To formulate a question related to the domain (for example the analysis of a legal concept or the analysis of an affirmative or negative question);

2. To identify the relevant legal sources in order to formulate a comprehensive answer;

3. To compare the result of the conducted analysis with the existing theories and doctrines in the field;

4. To discuss relevant legal problems and practical situations;

5. Concluding remarks.

The role of the teacher/tutor/supervisor is accomplished by the mean of teaching in small groups, usually formed from 2-5 persons. The written form of the project should be done in an academic manner and using the adequate language. The supervisor has not to read the whole project, his role is limited just to involve the students into the activity. His task consists, also in enhancing and stimulating student's competencies and aptitudes.

From this aspects, I consider of a great importance the use of Active Learning methods, especially PBL in teaching different disciplines at Public Administration program. Some extra arguments that can enforce the use of PBL in modern teaching can be presented as follows:

1. The collaboration with future and possible employers, the internship is a good opportunity to launch it.

2. The students will be motivated to learn theoretical aspects of the discipline with regard to identify the relevant solutions to solve the problem.

3. The role of the professor is to guide the student with regard to the problem to be solved. The education becomes more and more student centered: Less Us. More Them!<sup>55</sup> We focus too much on teaching and do not permit learning.

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<sup>54</sup> Olaf Jull Sorensen, presentation for Moldovan Delegation at Aalborg University in the period 8-12 February 2016

<sup>55</sup> Gary Steger, TEDX NY, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-06cPuXf30>

4. To enhance the capacities to work in group. This will allow to identify free-riders from young period and will prepare for the life realities.

5. The students will become more open minded and will offer the necessary support to each other.

6. Students will have a proactive implication in curricula design.

7. Students will become more engaged to enhance their own competencies to learn, and will become more self-critical.

8. The academic staff will become more visible outside University due to the collaboration with potential employers.

9. The study program will have a relevant impact in the society, because of the collaboration and the involvement of external parties.

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