“IT ACTUALLY MADE ME THINK”: PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS CLASSROOM

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We advocate for problem-based learning (PBL) as a rhetorical pedagogy for business communication. Briefly put, classic PBL inverts the typical instructional sequence; rather than presenting concepts first and then asking students to apply them, PBL creates situations in which students must learn the concepts in order to solve a “problem” constructed for that purpose. Thus, students learn in an iterative process as they cycle through the three key questions: “What do we know?” “What do we need to know?” and “How will we learn it?” We advocate emphasizing three key elements inherent in classic PBL: rhetoricity, locality, and change.

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FIRST DAY OF classes, mid-January. Students arrive in their classroom to find a simple set of instructions on the white board:

Find your group members and sit with them.

Three questions are listed on the other side of the board:

1. What do you know?
2. What do you need to know?
3. How will you learn it?

And so begins another semester of problem-based learning in WRT 227, Business Communications, at the University of Rhode Island (URI). After asking the instructor for help and not receiving any, students are forced to rely on themselves to solve this problem and complete this first assignment of the term. Lost, they turn to the three
questions on the board. *What do we know?* They know that they are in a computer classroom, and they know how to use the computers to some extent. They also now know that the instructor will stay out of it until they figure out the solution on their own. *What do we need to know?* Where to find the list with the members of each group. *How will we learn it?* Accurately, they quickly realize that they need to use the tools in front of them to learn what they don’t yet know.

Within 5 minutes, most students have logged on to WebCT (the online course management system), read an introductory message in their mailboxes, and found the list of groups posted to the discussion board. Within 8 minutes, they relocate around the room in their assigned groups. The few students who don’t already know how to use WebCT are quickly taught by their classmates, and all students have logged on by 10 minutes into the class session. By 10 minutes into the class, students know that they will have to do the work for themselves, that this is no lecture class.

Both of us have been teaching business communication in various forms for over 10 years. We were trained in the active and rhetorically robust “case” method advocated in Porter, Sullivan, and Johnson-Eilola’s (2003) *Professional Writing Online* and, since that time, have continued to integrate some of the best insights and practices as circulated in the journals and discussed at conferences. We have also borrowed from other disciplines our approach to active, constructivist pedagogies in which students create knowledge together, pooling their different perspectives, insights, experiences, and areas of expertise—in theory, for deeper learning and more engaged educational experiences (for more on constructivist pedagogies across the disciplines, see Bain, 2004; Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006; Kuh, 2008).

In this article, we advocate for one such pedagogy in particular for the business communications course: problem-based learning (PBL). Briefly put, classic PBL inverts the typical instructional sequence; rather than presenting concepts first and then asking students to apply them, PBL creates situations in which students must learn the concepts in order to solve a “problem” constructed for that purpose. Thus, students learn in an iterative process as they cycle through the three key questions: What do we know, what do we need to know, and how will we learn it? In this article, we advocate emphasizing
three key elements inherent in classic PBL: *rhetoricity*, *locality*, and *change*. Rather than keeping those possibilities embedded, we want to foreground their prominence within PBL.

Since PBL pays particular attention to the local communities surrounding our classrooms, we begin with an overview of our context. We both regularly teach WRT 227: Business Communications. This course is taught through the Writing & Rhetoric department at URI by our faculty, instructors, and graduate students. It is intended for sophomores and juniors from the College of Business Administration. Business students at URI major in accounting, international business, management, and “wanting business.” This final group of students consists of those petitioning to get into the College of Business, who take the course hoping that they will soon be admitted to the college. Many, but not all, of our classes meet in networked computer classrooms, providing each student with a laptop or desktop. This situation allows us to ask students to begin assuming roles found in their majors; for example, how might an entry-level accountant respond to this problem? We also know the courses that certain students have taken and will take in the future, offering us some background knowledge that we can expect them to have.

Before discussing PBL in more detail, we want to first bring it to life with a more complex problem than that in the opening vignette. Both of us teach a blood drive project at some point in the term. In terms of documents produced, the blood drive project is rich: In order to host a campus blood drive, students must fill out forms and compose a range of solicitation letters, agreement memos, inquiry emails, publicity flyers, radio spots, tent cards for the dining halls, signup sheets for volunteers, thank-you notes, and a reflective transmittal memo to the professor. The research is also rich: Students can use the Web, but they also need to visit campus sites and talk to actual human beings. And the collaborative work is undeniable, as this is too large a project for any one student to do alone in the short time frames we allow. This example from our classes might help to illustrate how these three elements—*rhetoricity*, *locality*, and *change*—can work together in PBL and thus help our students more effectively learn what we consider to be key concepts in business communication.

Blood drive projects epitomize much of what brought us to shift our business communications course toward PBL. In addition to
promoting active, constructivist learning in a collaborative setting and requiring students to practice a wide range of business-oriented genres and situations, our blood drive projects also highlight rhetoricity, locality, and change.

*Rhetoricity.* Throughout the project, students attend to the full rhetorical situation:

- Who is the audience? (Example: owner of the local pizza place)
- What is their purpose? (Example: to obtain a donation of free pizza for all who give blood)
- What genre is appropriate? (Example: a letter, followed up with a phone call and a face-to-face visit)
- What tone and style will be effective? (Example: respectful and professionally concise)
- What document design issues matter? (Example: the choice of letterhead, bulleted key information on logistics)
- What is the writer’s ethos? (Example: a student, but also the representative of an organization hosting a major service event)

*Locality.* Reflecting a turn toward place in rhetoric and composition, this approach is reflective of and responsive to local communities and campuses (Keller & Weisser, 2007; Reynolds, 2004). No matter when we teach this project, it always seems to coincide with an actual blood drive happening on campus. Thus, the blood drive is a local issue, successful only with support from local organizations. Although the Red Cross is involved, student research inevitably leads them to its local instantiation, the Rhode Island Blood Center. More importantly, campus blood drives are indeed hosted and organized by students just like themselves on their own campus.

*Change.* This notion of change operates on multiple levels for us. First, we are interested in creating an environment in which students experience the pragmatics of, simply put, getting something done. More elegantly stated, our students are learning how to accomplish coordinating tasks with complicated outcomes within an organizational setting. Second, we are also interested in creating an environment in which students can test out for themselves different social, political, and ethical stances, different ways of being in the world, so
to speak, especially in the business world. The blood drive compels students to envision change as “doing something good.”

Students in one of Michael’s classes picked up on this theme of change. On the final day of the blood drive project, a 3-day blood drive was just beginning in the student union. Reflecting on the coincidental timing, he entered class expecting to see not only their finished projects but also a few bandages on the arms of those who had just given blood. Students, after all, had just spent the better part of 2 weeks advocating for more blood donations through student organizations. They knew the facts, and they realized the urgent need for continuous donations. Collecting their folders, Michael asked how many students had given blood yet. No hands were raised. Further, no students planned to donate blood during any point in the next 3 days. One student turned the conversation around and asked Michael if he had donated yet, or if he was planning on it. Admitting he neither had nor was planning on it, Michael allowed the class to consider how difficult change can be for the remainder of the class. As one of Libby’s students wrote in a course self-evaluation, “I can’t believe how difficult it can be to try to do something good!” Indeed, it is.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING: AN OVERVIEW

Like other pragmatically based theories and pedagogies, PBL thrived in professional schools long before making its way to the more traditional disciplines in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. The earliest cited examples of PBL appear in reforms to medical education at Canada’s McMaster University (see Neufeld & Barrows, 1974). In the mid-1970s, advances in research and technology necessitated a different radical teaching paradigm to prepare medical practitioners. Reliance on content cramming—the predominant model at the time, in which each doctor was trained as an “expert” with knowledge on the tip of her tongue—grew increasingly impossible with the rapid proliferation of new information, new research, and constantly changing protocols. Instead, educators at McMaster devised a more strategic approach, in which students would learn how to find and use the information appropriate to any given situation. Rather than counting on having the research on the tip of their tongues, so to speak, students learned how to access and
apply what they needed, keeping it within reach of their fingers instead. In other words, they learned and practiced procedural knowledge. They engaged with large amounts of content through a procedural framework, thus learning how to learn as they went. This more strategic approach has since been adopted by numerous medical and other professional schools: business, pharmacy, dentistry, and nursing, to name a few (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Amador, Miles, & Peters, 2006; Delisle, 1997).

In its purest forms, PBL follows a set and predictable pattern in the classroom:

1. Instructor presents student groups with the problem.
2. Students compile their own knowledge, asking “What do we know?”
3. Students reach the limits of their own knowledge and brainstorm “What do we need to know?”
4. Students rank-order their learning goals and ask “How will we learn it?”
5. Students divide responsibilities for these learning issues and execute their plans.
6. Students bring back their new knowledge to the group, integrating and negotiating what they’ve learned with what they already knew.
7. Students take stock of where they are now and articulate what they need to learn next, repeating steps 2 through 7 as often as needed.

Note the agent in six out of seven of these stages: Students must take responsibility for learning. The instructor’s role is to set up the problem, to facilitate and guide, and to sequence different phases of the problem to help students accomplish the course objectives. With the creation of thoughtfully sequenced and situated problems, PBL leads with the scenario, demanding that students learn their way into the course content through a particular context. Thus, our PBL classes do not begin with an overview of the theory that we are about to apply or the approach that we are about to try. Instead, problems function inductively, so that students will learn the theory from their practices in a framework that we create.

For example, consider the opening day prompt on the white board with which we began this article. In past semesters, we might have taught an introductory sequence on “getting started with WebCT,” perhaps with some interaction and a front-of-the-class demonstration.
It probably would have taken at least 20 minutes and would have been both boring and redundant for most students—and for us. Instead, students began working the problem on their own using their own resources, resulting in deeper learning that was both effective and efficient.

PBL has a few qualities that we think make it particularly well-suited to the business communications curriculum. First, as already discussed, the concept of “rhetorical situation” drives the learning. Working with the new owner of a local child-care center, Libby’s students devised multifaceted marketing plans and presented their recommendations to him. In addition to their onsite, Internet, and print research, they also needed to pay very careful attention to their audience—the nice man who attended their presentations and genuinely wanted their creativity and insights. One student wrote on an end-of-semester evaluation that “it was a lot more difficult to do with a real audience, because if we wanted him to really change things, we had to be careful about how we presented it.” The authenticity of the rhetorical situation motivated the students to greater sophistication in both their visual presentations and their written reports for him.

Second, PBL demands writing and speaking. These elements are crucial to the learning process and to any business communications curriculum. Likewise, they are also crucial to the PBL process in any discipline. During every class session, groups informally report to the rest of the class about their progress and new insights. Each project—and many times, each phase within a problem—culminates in a written product. Specific to our business communications classes, each final packet contains an extensive reflective memo, articulating and justifying the rhetorical choices made.

Third, PBL relies on a flexible and generative inventional framework that must be altered to suit the occasion—a heuristic. Students internalize this heuristic through repeated practice in different situations, enabling them to become more effective business writers wherever they may end up. With this model, a second-year course becomes not a mandated coverage course but rather a set of learned practices that can be called upon and deepened as students continue through their education and careers. Libby’s students illustrated this
principle in action in fall 2007. Frustrated by repeated technological failures in their classroom, one group of students began to joke about their “problem” classroom. They mockingly used the three-question framework at the start of class:

- *What do we know?* “This classroom sucks. The laptop batteries are shot before we get here.”
- *What do we need to know?* “Why can’t we just plug them in? Why are there no outlets or cords available to us? Why was this brand new ‘smart technology’ classroom designed with inadequate technology?”
- *How will we learn it?* “Storm the Dean’s office!”

From their joke, a new problem was born; Libby dropped the fourth project in favor of pursuing their new “not-so-smart” classroom problem. Whether or not the students realized it, we could see that they had internalized the heuristic deeply enough that when confronted with a frustrating situation, they used it.

Fourth, PBL establishes the importance of distributed roles and expertise in collaboration. In a PBL situation, students cannot effectively work on the project unless the tasks are distributed and completed simultaneously and cooperatively. For example, in Michael’s class, one group member conducts background research on the company’s Web site while another calls a representative from the company with questions being fed to him by a third student, working between the two.

**WHAT PBL ISN’T**

Since PBL relies on situations within which students consider change, it overlaps with many pedagogical approaches in business communication. Moreover, situational learning in general is not new to the teaching of business communication. In fact, even many genre-based approaches tend to rely on situations or cases for the context within which students employ a particular genre, such as a memo or business letter. The business communication textbook market offers numerous books that rely on real-world situations. However, most of these situations only use the context for background in order for students to practice with a genre. Thill and Bovée’s (2008) *Excellence in Business Communication* and its family of related texts provide students with
numerous real-world contexts involving companies very familiar to students. For example, in the “Writing Negative Messages” chapter, instructors may assign students any number of longer writing projects, such as “No deal: Letter from Home Depot to faucet manufacturer.” The task and title, while surrounded by thorough descriptions of context, give students the answer up front—students do not see how genres and documents emerge from a particular problem and situation. Instead, the genres and documents are predetermined and applied to a situation. In contrast, a PBL approach might use that same real-world situation but not require a specific outcome or product. We tend to use textbook situations for ideas, but then we revise them into a PBL format. The title might instead read “Leaky Faucets, Leaky Profits,” and the students would be charged with deciding what genres and documents they need to produce in order to address this problem as Home Depot employees.

Additionally, PBL may strike some as a case-based approach because it does not foreground genre. Self-contained and well-developed cases provide students with a fairly structured point of access and ask students to analyze a particular incident. Cases provide an excellent means of studying organizational communication, especially how such communication is influenced by organizational crises (see House, Watt, & Williams, 2004; Zoetewey & Staggers, 2004). Cases differ from PBL in two important ways. First, similar to the real-world contexts discussed above, case projects often demand specific products from the students—an analysis paper, or a memo, or a business plan, for example. Second, most cases are introduced after a thorough discussion of the theories or concepts to be addressed. In a case-based classroom, instructors might offer the principles for a “bad news” letter and then push the concept further through the use of an organizational crisis situation. In contrast, instructors in a PBL classroom would present the crisis first and then guide students through the process of learning how to handle bad news sensitively, how to find appropriately broad and efficient delivery systems, and how to collaborate effectively to find creative solutions. The crucial difference is in the ordering of the pedagogical sequence: case first, rather than concepts first.

Following the service-learning turn in rhetoric and composition, business communication has also witnessed an increase in the number
of service-learning and experiential learning pedagogies. Unlike case-based approaches, such initiatives tend to move students beyond the classroom and into the community. In general, such learning highlights the service aspect of assigned projects, with the goal of “helping” a targeted group, organization, or individual (see Bowdon & Scott, 2003; Bush-Bacelis, 1998; Littlefield, 2006; McEachern, 2001; Mennen, 2006). In its best form, service learning echoes many of the goals of PBL. Recent advocates of service learning, especially in the field of professional writing, have given thoughtful consideration to the role of “service” in these curricular shifts. Grabill (2001) writes, “Service learning allows students and teachers to move into community contexts in structured, meaningful, and potentially long-term ways in order to solve problems” (pp. 152-153). Such a characterization of service learning is more productive as it avoids creating and relying on the dichotomy of non-profit versus for-profit organizations (see Hutchinson, 2005; Mara, 2006). This view “puts more emphasis on doing things than on being someplace” (Deans, 2007, p. 292). Rather than entering the community or partner organization with a “product” in mind, more critical pedagogical approaches, such as Mara’s (2006) use of charrettes (a collaborative problem-solving process between professionals and community members), involve “no prefabricated solution” (p. 231). As with both real-world and case-based assignments, service learning opportunities can easily become powerful and exciting PBL projects. Indeed, service learning can and should provide meaningful real-world contexts and cases. The crucial distinction, again, is in the amount of parameters set by the instructor and the order in which those elements are introduced to students.

**PBL AND RHETORICITY**

Although it may seem like splitting hairs to differentiate among these pedagogical approaches, we would argue that PBL moves the classroom situation closer to authentic rhetorical learning, with its emphasis on deriving solutions from the situation itself. Another way to conceptualize this switch is to think along a spectrum of how many parameters are given to the students upfront, and how many different types of rhetorical choices students are required to make for themselves.
We locate genre-based assignments on one end of this spectrum: In the typical genre-based assignment (e.g., “write a memo to your boss requesting permission to telecommute” or “revise this bad news letter to a client”), most of the rhetorical parameters are given—the genre, the audience, and often the tone as well (see Figure 1). In such classrooms, teacher and textbook present the necessary information, and students practice the skills at home and turn in their completed draft for review and revision. Farther along the spectrum, we’ve found case-based assignments, in which students are exposed to concepts that they then apply to a case. The specific genre or genres may or may not be assigned; other elements of the rhetorical situation may or may not be spelled out. Approaching the opposite end of the spectrum, in situational assignments, students are placed in a situation and need to figure out for themselves how to respond, often guided by a particular chapter in a textbook. Their completed projects may include a range of genres. At the far end of the spectrum, we put PBL. With PBL, students are not provided with a guiding theory or theme for the project; rather, it is up to them to figure out what the situation calls for, how to do what they are being asked to do, and how to do it effectively. Because it prescribes so few of the parameters, we claim that PBL provides an inherently rhetorical framework for the business communication classroom. But it is also more than that.

According to Amador et al. (2006), PBL “allows both us and our students to see the purpose of higher education: informed, thoughtful, and engaged citizens working together to solve problems that people really care about” (p. 131). And in this manner, it bridges the rhetorical divide of much professional writing pedagogy. Service-learning initiatives sought to overcome the techne-centric approach to professional writing. Rather than focusing on the “making of” professional documents, service learning focused on praxis, on the
social action of professional writing. In turn, seeing professional writing as praxis promotes the goal of creating a critical citizenry. PBL, as described by Amador et al. (2006), further blurs the praxis/techne divide introduced by Aristotle, in which praxis occupies public life and techne occupies the work/professional sphere. As Mara (2006) describes in his characterization of charettes, they “fold praxis and techne concerns together in a way that demonstrates how bodies are affected by both practical and political concerns” (p. 220). When solving local problems, students engage in activity systems that require a concern for praxis and techne, even if they remain physically on campus. Genres and audiences change daily—there are no predetermined products. And, as students quickly realize, change is difficult and messy.

PBL AND LOCALITY

Our arguments for PBL’s rhetoricity, locality, and potential for change may sound a bit too pie-in-the-sky without some additional examples. The local angle functions at several levels, beyond simply making it “real” for the students. Here, all the standard arguments in favor of service learning apply (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997; Cushman, 2002; Deans, 2000; Peck, Flower, & Higgins, 1995). Students see us modeling a connection to our community, and they also begin to notice things around them that they might not see otherwise. As with service learning, focusing on the local allows students to begin constructing themselves as student-citizens, not just as precorporate business students. Shifting to PBL has required us to stay open to local situations that may present themselves. We read the community and campus newspapers differently, and (as with the “not-so-smart” classroom problem) we listen to our students a bit differently as well.

In a recent semester, one of Michael’s students came to class out of breath and visibly shaken. After she got settled, she explained her situation: She is diabetic and needs to eat when her blood sugar gets to a certain point. Most buildings have vending machines with snacks available somewhere, but this particular building did not. Other students were concerned on her behalf, offering a variety of snacks from their backpacks. A month later, Michael designed the final project to investigate the vending machine situation on campus in
light of health and disability issues. What is the campus policy on vending machine availability? How assiduously is it followed? Is there a need for change? If so, who would be responsible for improving the situation? Unbeknownst to Michael, the university was in a negotiation year with their vending provider, making the research driving such questions especially timely and difficult.

Local doesn’t just mean “campus,” however. Excellent scholarship on service learning has persuasively argued the need to foster long-term and ethical relations with the organization with whom we do service projects (Cushman, 2002; Grabill & Simmons, 1998). It is clear that the same holds true for business and professional writing situations as well. We have been mindful of these arguments and have sought sustainable relationships with local community-based organizations as well. Libby has been a board member for a local charter school, with a public commitment to fostering a sustained relationship. There, too, a problem found us: The school quickly implemented a “no-nuts” policy when a 5-year-old student with a severe nut allergy enrolled. Many potential problems ensued. We decided that an appropriate scope for Libby’s students would be to research hot-lunch options and arrangements and make recommendations to the school. To successfully complete this problem, students needed to research the federal regulations for providing free and reduced lunches in public schools, understand the school’s mission statement and curricular framework, find all the possible hot-lunch providers in the state, compare their costs and menus, and deliver an oral presentation of the financially and ideologically feasible possibilities to the school administration and board, following up with a written recommendation report. Quite literally, the school had a problematic situation, and our students helped research and find a way through to viable solutions.

**PBL AND CHANGE**

As we’ve suggested above, we contend that designing PBL problems with a specifically local emphasis allows instructors to push the rhetorical components of the course into high gear. Now we go further—emphasizing the local makes possible an ethic of change permeating the class. As we have discussed and developed our courses over the years, we have asked ourselves and each other if the PBL
approach might encourage students both to conceptualize possibilities for change and to realize their own capacity to enact it.

It has been our hope that PBL does just that. By placing students in multiple rhetorical situations, it develops the ability to recognize differences among and across those situations. By creating complicated problems situated locally, PBL allows students to see for themselves how change can realistically happen in all its messiness and complicatedness—and when it is not possible, as well. After a few problems, students see that the solution is never simply top-down or bottom-up. Instead, it is usually both/and, within a more community-based context with additional pressures from outside the classroom. Students quickly learn that they need to attend to all dimensions—immediate, organizational, social, political, ethical, economic, environmental—in a given problem. It gets beyond simple “just resist!” approaches (rare in business students anyway) and simple “okay, you’re the boss!” responses (far more common). Instead, they find that they need to locate where and how they can have just enough power to get the job done.

For example, one of Libby’s students wrote in her reflective memo, “In order to pull this off, I had to write myself in as a managerial-level employee. Once I made that assumption, I could get things done.” In another class, a different group had designed and drafted a contract to specify the different responsibilities for different parties in the blood drive. One student had lined up her sorority and another offered his fraternity as “sponsors” for the blood drive, and the group was asking for seed money to purchase extra incentives for donors. Their third member asked, “But what do we call ourselves? We can’t just say WRT 227 is our organization.” The key: They didn’t need money from the Greek system, they needed the organizational credibility.

Thus, we believe that if PBL is more rhetorical and more local than other approaches, it carries with it more potential for engendering an ethic of realistic change.

COMPLICATIONS, FRUSTRATIONS, AND SIGNS OF HOPE

As with any situational learning that asks students to move beyond the classroom, there are complications. The same elements that make
PBL so rich and rewarding for our students and us also introduce obstacles. In what follows, we describe five of those complications, while also pointing to the potential for such opportunities to function as reflection on our teaching—pedagogical reality checks.

1. **Too local.** In our experience, the best problems are local problems. Local problems engage students, provide various avenues for research, and offer insight into change on a local level. However, local problems also provide the potential for students to be involved in or affected by the problem. More than likely, a number of our students will have had firsthand experience with a particular problem we use for the course. Again, this is generally a positive element of PBL; for example, many students had experience using a campus-based designated-driving program or had friends who had volunteered for the program. Unfortunately, there was also a student who had lost a boyfriend that semester in a car accident. The designated-driving project hit unusually close to home for her. When we use very local problems, we also open the class up to uncomfortable situations that may involve them on a personal level.

2. **Phase discomfort.** Some students are uncomfortable with the PBL structure, in which a clear end product or outcome is not presented along with the problem. In a typical genre-based pedagogy, students know that they are producing a bad news letter to employees, for example. The lack of such predetermined ends proves frustrating for some students; as one student wrote, “It was frustrating not to know what our final project would be from the beginning (3 phases). It almost caused me not to work on the first 2 because by the time I got to the third, the project was completely changed.”

3. **Group dynamics.** This particular complication is not unique to PBL. Group projects in all courses are prone to difficulties in group dynamics. However, our experience shows that creating balanced groups is key to successful PBL. Luckily, since our business communications courses are populated by business students for the most part, we can divide them up based on majors, such as accounting, international business, and so on. Also, PBL makes it much more difficult for a sole group member to complete the entire project. Each group member needs to contribute or the group suffers, especially since there is no predetermined outcome that a single group member can target. Having said that, peer evaluation mechanisms play a crucial role in ensuring accountability.
4. **Level of client involvement.** When the problems directly involve outside audiences such as clients, the success tends to hinge on the clients’ level of involvement. Students need feedback and guidance as they are working on the problem. Much of this cannot come from the teacher, requiring a client to guide students. Without active client involvement, a project can suffer and groups can get frustrated. After presenting recommendations to what seemed to be a disinterested audience, one of Libby’s students mused, “I liked the real life scenarios, just wished our visitors followed through more.”

5. **Teacher not expert.** Since there are few predetermined outcomes or products, and due to the expansive potential for problems, teachers do not function as experts in the subject matter. Occasionally, we lead students down wrong paths as we try to help them research a problem. We do not have solutions for the problems, making it difficult for us to offer “right” answers. There could be a multitude of right answers. Another student acknowledged that “at times it was frustrating, but it got you thinking in different directions that you may not have normally done.” During the designated-driving project, students quickly realized that the teacher lacked the answer to why the program failed. As one student wrote, “It was difficult when we had questions that no one could answer. I did like the sharing of ideas by peers, though.” This can be an unsettling dynamic for many teachers, comfortable in their traditional role as “experts.” Nonetheless, it potentially places the teacher in a position like the students—a researcher looking for clues and potential answers. We learn with our students.

Despite the pedagogical, logistical, and sometimes emotional difficulties, we have found that moving in the direction of PBL satisfies our compulsion to teach with an emphasis on rhetoricity, locality, and change. Our students can be a tough crowd, yet over the years we have found that they respond well—with some very sophisticated results—to our rhetorical, local, and change-oriented business communications course design. We are fully aware that students might be just as happy in (and well-served by) a more traditional syllabus, but our commitment to rhetorical pedagogies for change pushes us to try. Happily, it seems this effort lands with some students. One end-of-semester evaluation claimed that in our class, “we do much more work. My roommate is in a different class and it’s a joke. But I learned more, so HA!” In the refreshingly honest course evaluation referenced in our title, an anonymous student wrote that
the course “actually made me think. A lot of professors just spoon-feed, which is cool with me, but you don’t learn as much.”

Through PBL, students are experiencing deep rhetorical learning, developing organizational sensitivity, learning to respect the local, and practicing an ethic of change, and some even suggest that they are working really hard. Which is cool with us.

References


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