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**Title: Problem Based Learning as a more effective method than Traditional Instruction Approaches at producing students who are more employable**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, time management, and creativity, are skills or abilities that enable an individual to perform well in the real-world working environment (Workable, n.d.). Individuals with great soft skills are highly sought after by employers around the world. However, did you know that approximately 3 in every 4 employers claim that they find it very difficult to find graduates who possess such relevant soft skills? (SHRM, 2019). According to a survey done by Cengage in 2018, between 65 to 74 percent of employers are looking for soft skills such as listening, critical thinking, interpersonal, and communication skills, among other skills, in potential candidates (Cengage, 2019). In the same survey, it was stated that approximately 73 percent of the employers claimed that they have a difficult time finding qualified candidates who possessed these soft skills. Additionally, roughly 34 percent of the employers even claimed that students have not been properly prepared for jobs by their respective schools. These staggering statistics tell us that there is something significantly wrong with our education system these days, whereby it has failed to instill soft skills that are highly in demand in today's workplace, into the students. Hence, it is painstakingly clear that the traditional approach of teaching and learning is no longer suitable for today's standards. Thus, it is unavoidable for us to ask the question, is there an alternative approach for today's students to learn all the necessary soft skills demanded by the employers? This brings us to explore other teaching or learning methods. One of the most promising teaching approaches that will be able to instill all of the relevant soft skills into the students is Problem-Based Learning (PBL). PBL is a teaching approach where students are given complex real-world problems as a source of motivation for them to explore and research all the necessary concepts, principles, and methods required to solve the problems (Duch et al., 2001). Students who are taught using PBL will possess abilities such as thinking critically to solve real-world problems, identifying and utilizing appropriate learning resources, cooperating with other individuals in groups, communicating effectively with others, and also learning continuously, all of which are skills that are highly sought after by today's employers. PBL differs from traditional learning methods in which students are only given reading materials and lectures to learn about concepts that might not even be useful in a real-world scenario. Hence, in this article, we argue that PBL is more effective than traditional instruction approaches at producing graduates who are more employable, because it produces graduates who possess the soft skills that are highly sought after by employers.

## **SUPPORTING IDEAS**

First and foremost, PBL is more effective in the development of critical thinking skills than traditional instruction approaches. Hence, students who underwent PBL will be able to master an important soft skill in demand, which will definitely boost their employability. According to a research done by, El-Shaer and Gaber, PBL provides a successful learning climate that is helpful for the development of critical thinking by stimulating the students' interest, encouraging their participation in meaningful conversations, exposing them to the thoughts and perspectives of others, and cultivating a trusting and supportive learning environment (EL-Shaer & Gaber, 2014). In the same study done by El-Shaer and Gaber, it is claimed that students who experienced PBL showed more prominent improvement in critical thinking abilities and motivation to learn, which is made possible by allowing them to have the opportunity to impart their insights with other individuals. In another similar study, it has been shown that the use of PBL gives a positive effect on the critical thinking skills of students, or in other words, PBL improves the critical thinking skills of students (Aswan et.al, 2018). In short, critical thinking skills are very important to be possessed in order to improve a person's employability. Many studies have successfully shown that the PBL approach is able to instill critical thinking skills into the students who partake in this approach. Hence, it is clear that PBL will without a doubt, be able to improve a person's employability.

Moving on, PBL will be able to enhance the communication skills of the students' during their learning process, which in turn will lead to them possessing yet another soft skill in demand, and thus improving their employability. According to a study done by Beagon and Niall (2015), the students who underwent PBL improved their communication skills along with other skills such as team working skills, research skills, self-learning skills, etc. by approximately 60 percent. This shows that PBL is undoubtedly a very effective method in improving the students' communication skills, and thus improving their employability. Besides, another study done by Awang and Zawawi (2015) also showed that students who participate in problem-based learning are generally motivated by the problem at hand, and are able to demonstrate good communication skills among themselves. This might be due to the fact that PBL provides many opportunities for students to work together in small groups (Duch et al., 2001), which in turn will force them to pick up exceptional communication skills throughout their learning process in order to communicate effectively with their group members to solve the problems. Therefore, it is obvious that PBL is able to instill great communication skills into the students who partake in it. Since communication skills are considered by many employers to be a highly demanded soft-skill, it is very reasonable for us to claim that PBL will definitely be able to improve the

employability of its students, due to the fact that it allows its students to possess outstanding communication skills.

Furthermore, PBL will allow the students to attain exceptional cooperation or team working skills, which is also another valuable soft skill that is demanded by the modern-day employers. Better yet, in the midst of strengthening their team working skills, the students will also be able to attain other valuable soft skills such as listening skills and communication skills, all of which will most definitely be able to improve the students' employability. According to a study done by Idrus and Ridhuan (2018), PBL is not only used to directly develop problem solving skills, communication skills, and critical thinking skills as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, but it is also used to develop team working skills indirectly, due to the fact that PBL students are trained to work well in groups. Besides, in a similar study done by Othman et al. (2017), it is shown that the employability of students increases up to 56% if they possess great team working skills. In addition, according to a study done by Beagon and Niall (2015), the students' perceptions on the improvement of their skills and abilities such as team working skills, researching skills, self-learning skills, and communication skills, all improved by approximately 60% upon the completion of their first PBL session. This shows that PBL is able to directly improve the students' team working skills, along with other valuable soft skills by a huge margin. Hence, since it has been shown in many studies that PBL is able to develop team-working skills along with other valuable soft-skills, we can infer that PBL is undoubtedly a very effective method in increasing the employability of students.

### **OPPOSING IDEAS**

Although it should be very obvious that PBL will definitely be able to improve the students' employability, there are still some studies that might seem to indicate that the traditional approach is still a more effective approach when compared to PBL. Hence, we will discuss some of the studies that show these opposing findings, and provide some reasons as to why they might be wrong.

In a study done by Zaidi et al. (2017), it is shown that the mean GPA for students in the traditional Lecture-based Learning (LBL) is slightly higher than that of the students in the PBL group, where the mean GPA for the LBL group is 4.37 while it is only 4.19 for the PBL group. Although this finding might be true in indicating that LBL is better than PBL in improving student's academic performance, we argue that a slight superiority in terms of GPA does not guarantee that the students possess the required soft skills for the job market. This is because the examinations in traditional LBL do not evaluate the valuable soft-skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking skills of students,

but only evaluate the preparedness of the students to take the exam, and the level of their understanding of the topics, which are not relevant when it comes to improving their employability. On the other hand, PBL has already been proven to be able to significantly improve the soft skills that are highly sought after by the job market as mentioned by Carriger (2016), regardless of the GPA of its students. In short, even though there are some studies that show that the mean GPA of the students from traditional LBL are higher than those from PBL, there is no correlation between the GPA of the students, and their mastery of employable soft-skills. In other words, higher GPA does not make a graduate more employable. Instead, possessing mastery over valuable soft-skills would definitely improve the employability of any graduate, and most of the valuable soft-skills have been proven to be able to be developed via PBL.

Moving on, another study done by Zaidi et al. (2017) claimed that PBL could indirectly result in poorer development of social skills among students as there are less opportunities available for students who follow PBL, to participate in extracurricular activities that could help to develop their social skills, whereas that is not the case with LBL. The rationale behind this claim is that the PBL method requires its students to spend more time on doing preparation for upcoming classes, unlike the LBL method which only requires its students to receive materials and knowledge passively from the instructors. It is certainly true that PBL requires its students to spend more time on their studies compared to traditional instruction approaches. However, the PBL learning process is always conducted in the form of small group discussions, and every student in a group is encouraged to communicate and cooperate with his/her group members and instructors to solve the given problems. This will definitely help to enhance the students' communication skills, which will subsequently lead to improving their social skills as well. Besides, in the study done by Applin et.al (2011), the nurses who are PBL graduates stated that the formation of small discussion groups in PBL can enable students to enhance their critical thinking skills through dialogue, debate and application of research skills to tackle the nursing issues. Through the dialogues and debates done throughout the learning process, it is certain that the communication and social skills of the students will be improved significantly, regardless of their participation in extracurricular activities.

Lastly, Alcázar and Fitzgerald (2005) claimed that students in the LBL group show better performance in Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) such as knowledge, comprehension and application compared to students in PBL group. Although students in the LBL group might have better performance in LOTS, Alcázar and Fitzgerald (2005) also stated that students in the PBL group show better results in Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) such as analysis-synthesis and evaluation.

According to Pogrow (2005), HOTS are more valuable than LOTS as HOTS is very closely related to critical thinking skills, which is a soft-skill that is highly sought after by employers. Students with great HOTS and subsequently better critical thinking skills, will have a much better mindset to face and solve the issues and difficulties that might appear not only in the academic levels but also in the working environment. Yee et.al (2011) believes that students with better HOTS have the ability to learn from their mistakes and improve their future work quality by lowering their repeated errors, all of which are skills that are highly valued by employers. In short, even though students taught by traditional instruction approaches might perform better in LOTS, it does not mean that they possess the necessary soft skills to be more employable. On the other hand, PBL has already been proven to be able to instill students with better HOTS, which results in improving the students' critical thinking skills as well, eventually leading to the improvement in their employability.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this article, we have discussed the various reasons why we believe PBL is a more effective method than traditional instruction approaches in producing students who are more employable. This topic of discussion is of great importance due to the fact that several studies have discovered that the majority of today's employers agree that it has become very difficult to find employable graduates who possess the necessary soft skills such as communication skills, critical thinking skills, team working skills, as well as various other soft skills. Hence, we suggest that PBL should be implemented in place of the traditional instruction approaches as it can instill all the necessary soft skills which are sought after by the employers, into the students, as demonstrated in various studies discussed in this paper. If PBL is not implemented in place of the traditional instruction approaches, and the traditional instruction approaches are continued to be used to educate our youth, then the rate of unemployment in our country will definitely be on the rise in the coming years. This is because there will be fewer and fewer graduates who possess the soft skills that the employers are seeking, resulting in a massive rise in unemployment. Not just that, the workforce of the country will be significantly affected as there will be lesser and lesser manpower in every industry, as a result of the lack of employment. This will lead to further implications to the economy as many companies start to fail in continuing to provide their services, due to the lack of capable employees. In short, PBL is more effective than traditional instruction approaches in producing more employable students. Hence, we propose that PBL should replace the traditional instruction approaches so that the future generations will be well equipped with the necessary soft skills to be more employable, as failure to do so will bring upon significant consequences to the economy of our country.

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