

## Chapter #26

### A PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPROACH TO DIVERSITY

**Peter Stevenson & Rita Day**

*Department of Business Studies, St. Mary's University College Belfast, Northern Ireland*

#### **ABSTRACT**

Diversity is a positive approach to the systematic, fair and objective management of workforce diversity. Diversity can be triangulated into discrimination, difference and dominance. The objective was to achieve a better understanding of disabilities by working on a real-life case study. Students in this study attended a conference with other students from various European countries working together in order to find a solution to the case study during the three-day time frame.

Students needed to be open minded, willing to listen to the opinions of others in order to build upon their understanding of culture and behaviours and immerse themselves in a different way of life. The method was problem-based learning using the seven-step approach of clearing difficult or unclear words and terms, defining the problem, analysing the problem, reorganising the problem systematically (constructing a mind map), defining aims of learning, searching for information and reporting.

Following the investigation, students then determined that the case was a case of unlawful harassment and discrimination. The students highlighted the key findings and outcomes of their case study through a group poster presentation with each student having an opportunity to articulate his or her findings to the wider audience.

*Keywords:* diversity, disability, discrimination, harassment.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The two key aims of problem-based learning (PBL) are, firstly, to establish a cohesive and an integrated knowledge of a realistic problem and, secondly, the application of problem-solving skills by having students acquiring and utilizing their knowledge to solve this problem (Larmer, 2015). Students and their prospective employers' value PBL because it can be subject-specific or generic in nature and can enhance student topic knowledge at the same time as giving them a toolbox of work-related skills (Adams, 2014). PBL is a teaching pedagogy which is student-centered, using a didactic method and a hybrid approach between education and working, or practice. It encompasses active learning in a multi-disciplinary way. PBL gives a practical insight into a creative and innovative teaching approach. Although PBL is not a widely used approach, it does offer didactic skills development for students in any disciplinary area (Savin-Baden and Wilkie, 2006). It enhances digital information literacy skills, critical thinking skills, collaborative shared resources and the exchange of key ideas. The multi-phenomena approach to this study, uses student-gathered information from group discussions and the verification of the process through the subject matter expert intervention. It offers a lateral and contemporary, pedagogical way forward in education and in real-world problems (Bratton & Gold, 2017).

## **2. BACKGROUND**

The study was developed following the delivery of the case study at a Human Resource Conference and the recognition from peers. It delivered a more informed understanding of diversity. This conference was attended by European delegates and hosted in Enschede in the Netherlands. The PBL approach was further investigated as part of the Education and New Developments (END) conference proceedings in May 2018. A problem-based approach was preferred rather than a project-based approach, as it offered a multi-disciplinary level as opposed to a single-subject approach.

The foundations of the problem-based approach as a contemporary phenomenon dates to 1928 and the work of John Dewey and William Kilpatrick (Edutopia, 2014). It enables higher order thinking skills and participants to have more control over the project development, exploring real-world problems and control over the outcome and results.

PBL was further developed in the 1960s to enable students to learn about a new topic through working together in a group to solve a problem. As with any work in groups, it can lead to conflicts of interest and different viewpoints and the topic of diversity can be very subjective, often resulting in more than one opinion and answer. According to (Savery, 2016 p.9), “PBL is an instructional (and curricular) learner-centered approach and empowers learners to conduct research, integrate theory and practice, and apply knowledge and skills to develop a viable solution to a defined problem”.

In this study, students take a very subjective approach to the problem. Students had to decide if the key character was discriminated against based on his or her disability (Kingston, 2018). This led to student discussion, debate and argument and collaboration at a multi-disciplinary level, using the diversity case study as the foundations.

## **3. OBJECTIVES**

The objective was to determine if a group of students from different cultural backgrounds could form a successful working group and find a solution to a problem within the area of diversity, using a case study, i.e., disability. The study hoped to establish if the process and participation in PBL could improve critical thinking skills and working in an unstructured way, leading to a better way of learning.

### **3.1. Purpose and research question**

The study aimed at investigating the students’ understanding of diversity within their own countries, using the conference as the learning platform. The case study had a unique approach because rather than the facilitator asking the questions, the students had to decide what questions needed to be asked in the first instance and then through the learning journey decide if these were the correct questions to reach a final decision and satisfactory outcome for the case study.

To attain the shared purpose, the following research questions were identified:

1. To find out if students from different countries can learn together.
2. Do students using PBL need scaffolding in the learning process?
3. What type of learning occurred?

### 3.2. Participants/process

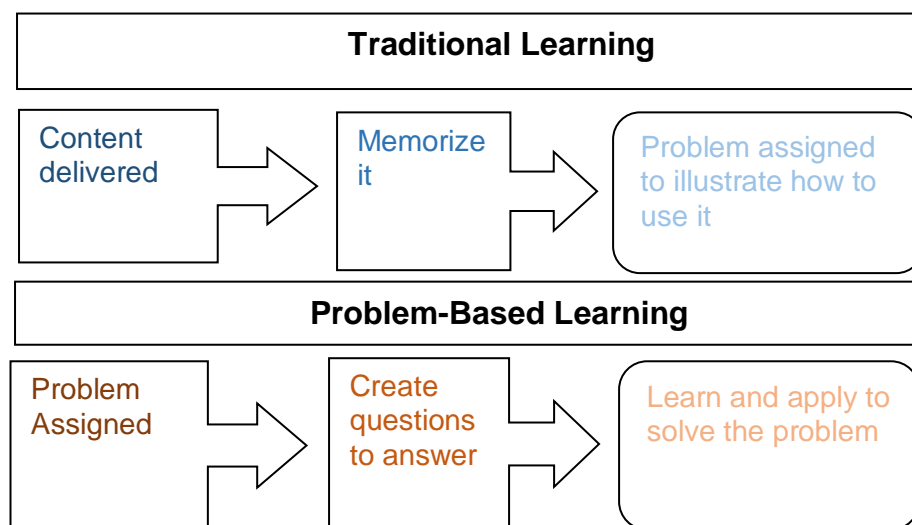
The study was made possible by the voluntary participation of approximately sixty third-level students in the HUMINT Student Conference on Diversity Management, with a subgroup, who were studying disability, of ten students (both genders) studying business or human resource management (HRM) and from the following institutions: University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna, Austria; University College, Leuven, Belgium; Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Finland; University de Bretagne Occidentale, Quimper, France; St. Mary's University College, Belfast, and Saxion University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands. The conference platform allowed for an authentic, interdisciplinary approach to partners within academia and industry.

### 3.3. Theoretical framework

As part of the European Human Resource Conference, groups of students worked on a disability case study. This setting gave the groups the opportunity for enhanced cultural experience through dialogue with other nationalities, working together and learning about their own approach to group work, (Beetham, 2016) discusses the 'open community' and finding and evaluating relevant, quality-rich media to enhance knowledge delivery and promote student engagement from a range of creative sources, and, in doing so, it develops and improves upon 'information' and 'media' literacy skills. The group used the seven-step method of PBL:

- i. Clearing vague or unclear words and terms
- ii. Defining the problem
- iii. Analysing the problem
- iv. Systematically reorganising the problem: constructing a mind map
- v. Defining the aims of learning
- vi. Searching information
- vii. Reporting

*Figure 1.*  
*Traditional Learning versus Problem-Based Learning.*



### **3.4. Research methodology**

Within the PBL approach, the research methodology was based on the proposition that students had to devise the correct questions. PBL uses a structured approach to define the problem: designing a scenario or case study around the issue, tuning it according to the specific topic, facilitating the dialogue and exhibiting the work. The framework above forms the basis of the approach and compares it with the traditional educational model (Savin-Baden, 2003).

The project was launched on the first day and offered an entry into the topic of diversity, and the tutor facilitated the initial discussions by asking open-ended driving questions, inviting a guest speaker along, and challenging the participants' understanding of disability, all with the specific purpose of stimulating a discussion, exploring cultural complexities and interrogating the project question to determine if it was correct to dismiss the character named Zelda Law, on the grounds of discrimination (see case study).

The participants' foundations were further explored and built on in-depth enquiry into the research area and developing knowledge and topic understanding. The research was student driven through contact with subject matter experts, library research, discussions and relevant lines of enquiry.

The study adopted a qualitative case study research design because it provided the opportunity to study diversity within the participants' contexts (Baxter and Jack, 2008). The group was issued with a case study based on the Stevenson and Hennessey Clothing Company. This fictitious company name and fictitious student name, Zelda Law, was used as the background to discuss a young student with a prosthetic arm and her disability case. The tutor explained any unknown wording, statements and concepts, the problem was defined, and the group then had to dissect the case study. The structure of the approach was three-pronged: (1) personal: the case viewed from Zelda Law's perspective. (2) human resources: the case was viewed from the human resource management's (HRM) perspective and (3) international: the case considered from different national perspectives. The students then formulated and performed self-study assignments to find answers.

Finally, the answer was exhibited through a presentation to peers within other topic groups and to the wider audience at Saxion University of Applied Sciences. This enabled the students to take their ideas beyond the classroom and ensured that they invested time and invested effort into the project through the anticipation of a wider audience.

### **3.5. Problem design**

The role of diversity is a key issue in Human Resource Management; this study within a small international group helps to illustrate the evolution of diversity as a triangulated approach into discrimination, difference, and dominance and the complexity of the nature.

Students gathered information and relevant data and discussed these in the groups using content analysis and applying narratives. An unstructured interview with a guest speaker, purposively chosen because of his subject matter knowledge, was also used. At no point during the research collection stage or problem design stage did the students solve the problem by answering questions: they needed to devise the questions using the prompts from the scaffolding process. This approach uses higher order thinking skills and demonstrates a high level of facilitation skills in listening, questioning and feedback. The approach uses a questions-to-answers approach instead of an answers-to-questions approach, and, therefore, the physical space had to be considered.

The physical space in this scenario was formal within a classroom, but the social learning space amongst the participants was informal, using soft seating and group work. The students were given the materials and, using a lateral environment, worked through the facts available to them.

### 3.6. Quality issue

The case study research before and during the conference, as well as the questions with the subject matter expert (SME), were used to triangulate the methods. This, according to (Yeasmin and Rahman, 2012) is a strategy which can assist the researchers to increase the validity of their evaluation and findings.

### 3.7. Role of the tutor

In PBL, the tutor becomes the facilitator, stimulating creativity and engaging the students in the educational process. The tutor is not transferring information but rather directing the students to read specific topic literature and documentation, seeking primary research SME advice and by developing their critical literacy skills through qualitative secondary research on the internet. In this study, the tutor discussed the various levels of diversity management, such as workforce diversity, behavioural diversity, structural diversity and business/global diversity.

### 3.8. Traditional system versus PBL

The traditional focus is on the knowledge and whether learning is being directed and led by the tutor. The PBL approach is didactic and does not stem from a one-approach-fits-all mentality, but rather a group dynamic must be achieved before the learning can take place. In the traditional system the tutor has control of the room, and content is defined and prescribed by him or her whilst the student takes a more passive role, often as a scribe. However, in the PBL approach the student has an active role, the content is determined by the research used to tackle the problem, the students are responsible for the learning and focus is on the student skills and attitude, as is the outcome. Students need to develop this critical voice and be able to outline the four key functions: research, reflection, re-examination and reformulation (Carr, 2016).

Figure 2.  
Gold Standard PBL, Buck Institute for Education, 2015.



Problem-based learning requires students to work collaboratively in teams to seek solutions to multi-layered, real-life problems. This approach compels students to consider issues more broadly and acknowledge, perhaps for the first time, alternative views of the topic/case study.

### 3.9. Scaffolding the PBL process

The students were placed in small groups and within the groups there were strong individuals; it was therefore difficult to ascertain if different countries brought different approaches. Having read through the case study, the students then composed the following set of six question areas. This involved teamworking skills, listening skills, an appreciation of cultural diversity within the group and understanding that all opinions matter. A problem-based approach was preferred rather than a project-based approach as it offered a multidisciplinary level as opposed to a single-subject approach.

#### Facts and disability

1. What are the facts of the case?
2. Was Zelda Law disabled?
3. What is a disability?
4. Did the company (with their attitude) make Zelda Law disabled?
5. Was there an inequality or an injustice?

#### Recruitment Procedure

1. Was the company selection process appropriate?
2. Did the company promote equality of opportunity?
3. Was Zelda's recruitment systematic, fair and objective?
4. Did they follow the correct procedures i.e. job description, person specification, recruitment advertising, application process, shortlisting & interviewing, selection testing?
5. Was her training appropriate?
  - a. Did the HRM department give her bad advice i.e. contrary to company policy

#### Looks Policy

1. Can the company have a looks policy?
2. Is a looks policy discriminatory in law?
3. Did the looks policy discriminate against Zelda?

#### Communication

1. Was there a problem with the company's communication system?
2. Did the line manager behave appropriately?
3. Was there a problem with the line manager training?

#### Case Study

1. Does Zelda Law have a case against the company?
2. Was she discriminated against because of her disability?
3. Was she discriminated against, indirectly discriminated against, harassed or victimized?
4. What legislation helps you answer these questions?

Comparison – Introduce Riam Deane

1. Is there European legislation appropriating to the case?
2. Would the selection procedure have been carried out differently in different countries?
3. What is the relevant legislation in your country regarding the case?
4. Would the court have found a case of harassment?

The range of questions devised by the students shows the spectrum of possible outcomes, based on real-life events, alongside the complexity of the situation and the vast range of solutions. This study clearly demonstrated that there was not one optimum solution but a range of solutions.

The project dissemination was through students presenting this as a group to peers through posters. The group had to discuss the poster presentation and interact with the audience; this also led to additional questions and stimulated a conversation around their approach and outcome.

The research questions have been answered and addressed through the achievement of different students working collaboratively together on a shared project. The students do use PBL to scaffold the learning process, but they do so autonomously and through self-learning and, ultimately, a new pedagogical learning approach occurred. The posters below are some examples of the presentations:

*Figure 3.  
Poster on Disability from the conference.*



*Figure 4.*  
*Poster on Diversity from the conference.*



#### **4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The next evolutionary step might be to create a digital artefact rather than a poster. The participants were instructed to use posters to exhibit their findings, and a limitation of this PBL was not giving the participants voice and choice. This was mainly due to two reasons: not knowing the students' ability levels and level of PBL experience. A recommendation for future PBL may be for students to use twenty-first century competencies, such as digital technology, to exhibit or showcase the work.

This digital capture would enable PBL to showcase academic, professional and personal development. The ability to use PBL as a content curation tool would mean that in addition to a digital artefact, there would also have been the enhancement of literacy and digital skills (Beetham, 2016). The authors are in contact with the Buck Institute for Education in the hope of designing some case studies for the future.

#### **5. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION**

PBL promotes active learning, engages students and allows for higher order thinking (Savery, 2006). In this study, the students explored a real-world problem and sought to find answers through the completion of a case study. It was important to place the activity as part of a case study and therefore within a conceptual or cognitive framework. On the penultimate day, the tutor revealed the identity of Zelda Law in the case study as Riam Dean, a British law student with a prosthetic limb, who was removed from her job at a London Abercrombie & Fitch shop floor because she violated their 'looks' policy. The group then reached the conclusion that the case was a discrimination case rather than a disability case. Dean's dismissal was a consequence of unlawful harassment arising "not from treating the claimant differently from non-disabled associates [by enforcing the 'looks' policy], but in treating her the same in circumstances where it should have made an adjustment" according to (Topping, 2009).



“When PBL was successfully implemented, these barriers were overcome through insightful leadership, broad-based faculty ‘buy in’ and ownership, and recognition of the need for faculty and students to have sufficient time to learn from their own experiences by trial and error and make modifications that promote reflective adaptation to new learning/teaching methods” (Schwartz, Mennin, & Webb, 2002 p.171).

The entire student group did not reach a consensus, but this diversity of opinion is just as acceptable. The student feedback was very positive, citing PBL as an effective and efficient method of enhancing communication and problem-solving skills and an ideal opportunity to meet people from other countries and to help appreciate cultural diversity. The students also felt that individual opinions were heard and expressed and helped to understand the complex nature of international relationships.

The opportunities for replication possibilities within a larger audience come through dissemination in the students’ own educational establishments. The longitudinal study is through papers such as the END conference. The case study finished with a poster session, to showcase the students’ work, and the team pitching their solution to the case.

PBL is a creative, innovative, teaching approach. According to (Patton and Robbin, 2012) projects also draw students and topics closer together so that students experience learning as an integrated whole, rather than as a series of independent and separate learners and apply their knowledge in a directed manner. The project enabled the students to engage with industry, the community and business. PBL helped bridge the divide between intellectual ability and practical skills and merge the pedagogical practices into a unified approach.

The study did not reach a consensus amongst all the student participants. This demonstrates both the complexity and subjectivity of the study, and how subjectivity is the key driver because a range of range of small problems will contribute to answers for the overall picture.

The recommendations include gathering as much empirical data as possible using a mixed methodological approach of qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis during the session and at the end of the process. This would lend itself to purposeful sampling to address the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions.

There could be a change in how students present the findings, perhaps in the form of a report or a PowerPoint presentation at a PBL student symposium, rather than a poster.

Further research could be done into the level of impact which culture and bias have on PBL, perhaps developing a strategy to help overcome, or at least reduce, bias within the groups.

Finally, tutors could design a rubric to help scaffold the learning with the overall design and planning to align and standardise the approach, to manage the activities and to scaffold the student learning and, finally, to identify the key contemporary pedagogies gleaned from this approach.

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## APPENDIX 1

The case study is shown below:

### **The Company** **Stevenson and Hennessey Clothing Company**

Stevenson and Hennessey are now a worldwide clothing chain with more than 1,000 branches and a turnover last year of £2 billion pounds sterling (€2.32 billion). Stevenson and Hennessey are a business that do things differently. The business marketing campaign specifically targets the young with a cool-kid look that involves perfect bodies, flawless faces and super fun trips to the beach with an equally gorgeous boyfriend who can't keep his hands off you. The ultra-low-cut shorts and draped flannel tops are a 'must have'.

When the chain recently opened a store in Belfast, Northern Ireland, it was clear this was a business that 'did things differently'. Topless male models with Olympian physiques stood at the doorway. Skinny blond girls in miniskirts gyrated on the shop floor. All the staff exuded a youthful beauty that was as disconcerting as it was unrealistic, yet eager youngsters entered in droves to snap up the stylish clothes.

Stevenson and Hennessey were not ashamed of its marketing approach. The chief executive Brigid Showuni stated, "We go for the cool kids. A lot of people don't belong and can't belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely".

The business operates an ‘appearance/look policy’, and all new employees are given a 45-page handbook listing in minute detail the company’s strict ‘look policy’. This booklet dictates that hair should be natural, with no excessive dye, curling or straightening. Fingernails should be no more than a quarter of an inch long and make-up limited to natural foundation, blusher and lip balm. All new employees are given a uniform of jeans and a polo shirt although the company handbook does state that sales associates can wear their own clothing if it is in the ‘Stevenson and Hennessey’ style.

All the stores are identical and structured with three different types of team:

- A Visual team – individuals who are employed to travel around the stores checking that the shop and its staff ‘Look up to scratch’.
- An Impact team – an individual’s time is split between the shop floor and the stock room – folding clothes, helping customers and replenishing stock in the store.
- A Model team – employed for their appearance, given the task of personal shoppers to help customers, and briefed with closing the sale – effectively glamorous sales assistants.

### **The Employee – Zelda Law**

Zelda law was employed by ‘Stevenson and Hennessey’ to work in their Belfast store in 2009. She is an attractive young lady, 22 years old, who had just completed a BA Liberal Arts degree in St. Kevin’s University College, Belfast, a college based in the United Kingdom. Zelda was simply looking for a part-time job to help pay off her debts before entering the world of work. She was giving serious consideration to becoming a model, having been told by many friends that she was ‘highly attractive’. Zelda was born in the United Kingdom; her parents both came to England from the Middle East.

### **The situation – the facts from an unfortunate first week in Employment**

Zelda Law was born in 1987. An ‘amniotic band’— a constriction in the womb— meant she was born without a left forearm and was fitted with her first prosthetic limb at three months old. As she grew up, she learned touch rugby, street dance and basketball and joined the school debating team. She removes her arm only to sleep and shower. In the early days Zelda had great difficulty getting a prosthetic limb which was the correct colour. Modern technology has made this much easier.

In May 2009 Zelda Law was interviewed for the position of Impact Associate at Stevenson and Hennessey. She states, “The application form was simple, only asking for my name, address and email. It did not ask if I had a disability, which I found surprising.” At the interview Zelda wore a long-sleeved dress that hid her arms and she did not mention her disability. A polaroid picture was taken of her and seven other applicants. She received a job offer to work fifteen hours per week at £6.50. (€7.54 per hour). Delighted, she turned up for her induction day and was given the ‘look policy’ booklet. At the end of the meeting she whispered to the human resources man that she had a prosthetic arm and asked whether

she could wear something to cover the join. She was told to wear a white cardigan to cover her disability.

However, matters came to a head a few days later. On her second shift a worker from the visual team approached Zelda and demanded she remove her white cardigan. She told the visual team worker that she had permission to wear it. A few minutes later the shop manager came to Zelda and said, 'I can't have you on the shop floor as you are breaking the look policy. Go to the stockroom immediately and I'll get someone to replace you.' Later, Zelda was asked if she was prepared to work in the stockroom until the winter uniform arrived, which would hide her disability. She said no and with sadness resigned from her job within the company.

#### **Statement from Stevenson and Hennessey (after the event)**

S & H has a strong anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policy and is committed to providing a supportive and dignified environment for all its employees. We are committed to equality, fair employment and regularly train all our staff in the appropriate legislation. We feel we comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act fully and regret this unfortunate situation which arose with this employee. We will also review our communication policy and store manager training and consider, from a corporate viewpoint, if we need to make improvements. This will also involve a full analysis of our human resource management function to ensure it is robust and appropriate. Our recruitment processes will be given attention. However, in this instance we feel we did nothing wrong.

#### **Statement from Zelda Law (after the event)**

"It made me feel as though the store manager had picked up on my most personal, sensitive and deeply buried insecurities about being accepted and included. Her words pierced right through the armour of 20 years of building up personal confidence about me as a person and that I am much more than a girl with only one arm. She brought me back down to earth to a point where I questioned my self-worth. My achievements and triumphs in life were brought right down to that moment I realised that I was unacceptable to my employer because of how I looked. I have never encountered the stark reality of this attitude, but deep down I have always feared this, and in that moment my worst fears were realised. My entire perception of my own self-worth was shattered. It was a moment of clarity and pain. I am seriously thinking of taking a case against Hennessey and Stevenson to an employment tribunal because of the treatment I received within the company".

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## **AUTHORS' INFORMATION**

**Full name:** Peter Stevenson

**Institutional affiliation:** St. Mary's University College

**Institutional address:** 191 Falls Road, Belfast BT12 6FE

**Short biographical sketch:** Peter Stevenson is a senior lecturer in the Business Studies department at St Mary's University College, a college of Queen's University Belfast. A qualified teacher with thirty years teaching experience, he teaches Accounting, Marketing, Human Resource Management and Subject Application within the BA Liberal Arts and Post Primary Education degrees. He has researched and published on the themes of Innovative Change Management, Continuous Improvement (CI), Small-to Medium-sized Enterprises, Entrepreneurship, the Global Dimension to Education and Problem-Based Learning.

**Full name:** Rita Day

**Institutional affiliation:** St. Mary's University College

**Institutional address:** 191 Falls Road, Belfast BT12 6FE

**Short biographical sketch:** Rita Day is a lecturer in the Business Studies department at St. Mary's University College, a college of Queen's University Belfast. She teaches on both the BEd and Liberal Arts degrees on the following topics: Human Resource Management, Organisational Behaviour and Marketing and Strategy. Rita has worked in the higher education (HE) and further education (FE) sectors and worked as Senior Lecturer in Southampton Solent University for several years. Rita worked in industry for over 10 years before going into academia.