Interactional Research Into Problem-Based Learning

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Foreword

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This collection, assembled by Susan Bridges and Rintaro Imafuku, addresses critical questions central to uncovering insider (emic) understandings of how, in what ways, under what conditions, and with what consequences students (and by extension, facilitators/instructors or teachers) develop opportunities for learning collectively and individually, in and over time, and across configurations of actors and intertextually tied events. By bringing together empirical qualitative research guided by different theoretical and epistemological perspectives, Bridges and Imafuku lay a foundation for addressing an overarching question: Why are qualitative approaches critical to researching problem-based learning (PBL) interactions? This collection of empirical research in different educational contexts (K–12 and higher education), viewed through differing theoretical and methodological lenses, lays a foundation for examining what each individual lens makes visible about emic understandings constructed by participants and what can be learned by going beyond any individual perspective or context. By exploring what each theoretical lens makes visible across the chapters and how the research was undertaken, readers have an opportunity to develop a transdisciplinary understanding of the complex factors that influence and support student learning, not from the focus of outcome measures but from the emic perspectives and understandings of the participants.

What is unique about this volume is that rather than focusing on describing different methodological perspectives at an abstract level, the editors have included articles that have a common goal of gaining insights
into “emic perspectives.” This common goal creates the potential for constructing a deeper understanding of what each empirically grounded, theoretical, and methodological perspective contributes to developing a more holistic transdisciplinary understanding of how inquiry-based lived experiences support student learning in particular educational contexts within and across disciplines. This collection therefore makes visible what can be learned when different, uncommon, empirical-epistemological lenses address a common goal of exploring emic understandings developed by students as they participate in particular inquiry-based educational programs: problem-based earning, project-based learning, cooperative learning, and interdisciplinary professional education.

Each chapter presents an empirical research grounding for exploring the emic perspectives constructed interactionally in a particular educational setting. Each author/team of authors also makes transparent the logic of inquiry guiding the decisions of the problem of interest, the selection of a point of view (students, facilitators, teachers, and/or groups), the contexts of the study, the relationships among participants, the subject area, and the theoretical approach that guided the exploration of the problem-based/inquiry-based learning processes from emic perspective(s).

This collection makes visible how and in what ways the researchers in particular settings, seeking particular understandings of the emic perspectives of particular participants, developed theoretically and empirically grounded iterative, recursive, and nonlinear processes that supported them in studying complex and developing social, academic, interpersonal, and discursive ways of knowing, being, and engaging in inquiry-based processes collectively and individually within a collective. In bringing together these empirical studies, Bridges and Imafuku lay a foundation for exploring issues involved in examining what constitutes emic understandings or perspectives within and across times, settings, disciplines, and international as well as interdisciplinary contexts. The depth and transparency that the authors provide to make visible the theoretical basis of the study, the research logic, and the ways of constructing warranted accounts of particular emic phenomenon/a lay a foundation for developing a more holistic, transdisciplinary understanding of factors that influence student learning in problem-based/inquiry-based programs of study.

This volume therefore affords readers a unique opportunity not only to gain deep insights into particular forms of empirical qualitative research for studying emic or contextually bounded opportunities for learning, but also
to develop deeper, cross-disciplinary insights into challenges facing students in constructing understandings of the learning processes from particular lived experiences. When taken as a whole, this collection provides a basis for engaging in transdisciplinary dialogues about the potential sources, processes, and practices influencing how and in what ways students develop understandings of complex subjects in inquiry- or problem-based collective contexts. Individually and collectively, the chapters of this volume also direct researchers’ attention to accounting for particular configurations of actors, intertextually tied cycles of activity, and disciplinary requirements that are all part of developing and engaging in learning opportunities within particular curricular designs and educational settings.

In the following discussion I propose a way of reading across the chapters ethnographically to support readers in identifying and constructing a more holistic understanding of the situated nature and epistemological processes guiding each study in this volume. This proposed approach is grounded in anthropological perspectives on ethnographic research (Green & Bridges, 2018) that have guided research on PBL undertaken by Bridges and colleagues. This approach is an adaptation of Heath and Street’s (2008) principles for ethnographic inquiry, adapted here for exploring the inscribed arguments and processes within and across texts. As you read across the chapters, engage in

- suspending known categories from your own research in order to construct understandings of local and situated categories and referential meanings of actions being developed by participants and inscribed by the author(s);
- acknowledging differences between what you know and what the actor(s) (authors) in the context know based on what they inscribed and made transparent;
- identifying and constructing new ways of understanding (knowing) that are grounded in local and situated ways of knowing, being and doing the processes and practices of everyday life as articulated by particular participants within the study as inscribed by the author(s);
- developing ways of (re)presenting what is inscribed (i.e., known) by local actors (authors) and what you (as ethnographer/reader) learned from the contrastive analyses across chapters to explore how, and what, different forms of empirical qualitative analysis
made visible students’ developing emic understandings of what constitutes learning in inquiry-based programs.

These principles are provided to support ongoing conversations about how emic perspectives are empirically constructed by researchers within and across differing epistemological perspectives as represented in this volume. By engaging in contrastive analyses within and across such perspectives, a more holistic and transdisciplinary understanding of the situated nature of learning and its consequences for particular students can be developed. These dialogues across perspectives have the potential to deepen understandings of the situated nature of learning-teaching relationships and knowledge constructed within particular times, events, and configurations of actors/participants. Thus, as Bridges and Imafuku have shown, the results of qualitative studies have the potential for informing facilitators’ (instructors’ or teachers’) actions and the decisions of curriculum designers as they develop inquiry-based programs.

REFERENCES