EDITORS’ INTRODUCTION

Why Focus on Interactions in Problem-Based Learning?

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This volume arose from an invitation by the editorial board of Purdue University Press to extend the work presented in the 2016 special issue (volume 10) of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-based Learning (IJPBL). Our goal for both collections has been to contribute to the growing evidence base that is affording new insights into student experiences in problem-based learning (PBL) as an inquiry-led approach as it is coconstructed through dialogic, interactional processes. In curating and shaping this volume, we recognised important points of departure from the 2016 special issue and, indeed, since the genesis of PBL in medical education half a century ago. We note that the field of interactional studies in PBL is not only growing but, significantly, is addressing the key philosophical, curriculum design, and pedagogical issues facing many learning approaches in an era of complexity, change, and ubiquitous access to information.

Given its focus on dialogic approaches and collaborative inquiry, PBL is a logical field to explore from a situated perspective. Indeed, as Dolmans and Gijbels (2013) noted, it is important to investigate “how the different elements of a PBL environment can be optimized for what kind of student, under which conditions and why” (p. 217). Evensen and Hmelo-Silver’s (2000) edited volume was one of the earliest attempts to create a compendium focussed on investigating the group meeting and self-directed learning in PBL in medical education and reported empirical studies drawing on self-reports, interviews, observations, and verbal protocols.

In this volume, contributors have further responded to our question: Why focus on interactions in PBL? In doing so, they have explored the key
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themes of students’ learning processes in PBL over time and across contexts, the nature of quality interactions in PBL tutorials (and how “quality” is achieved through talk and other modalities), facilitation processes, and the developing nature of PBL learner identity. In chapter 11, Savin-Baden’s article (reproduced from Savin-Baden, 2016) provides a framework of four transdisciplinary threshold concepts in PBL that support transformations in understanding: liminality, scaffolding, pedagogical content knowledge, and pedagogical stance. If we adopt this as a metaframing for the studies in this volume, we can see how each study’s focus on interactions in PBL contexts illustrates liminality by highlighting the moments of dissonance, conflict, or confusion that can generate transitions and transformations as conceptual epiphanies, new group norms and practices, and identity formulations. In terms of scaffolding, the studies on educational technologies and new digital information flows trace how new affordances are taken up by the facilitator and/or the PBL group, with analysis indicating the inherent PBL dilemmas related to the degrees of scaffolding necessary for learners across a variety of contexts. Shulman’s notion of pedagogic content knowledge remains, in his own words (Shulman, 2018), a fuzzy term, but as Savin-Baden argues, it underlies the importance of PBL to identity formation. In the studies in this volume, this can be seen in relation to professional education but also in terms of identities grounded in disciplines, for example, gender and mathematics education. Perhaps central to the nuances of the interactional studies in this volume is the notion of pedagogical stance, as, by taking an emic perspective, we are able to gain textured insights into the actions of students and their facilitators within and across the PBL cycle of inquiry.

The invited commentaries in the preface and the closing provide unique, “outsider” perspectives from an expert educational researcher (Green), on the one hand, and novice educational researchers (Verbeek and Maximo Chian) on the other. As editors, we trust that the etic and emic insights presented in this volume provide a platform for expanding and integrating interactional scholarship to extend the potential of PBL into its next 50 years.

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REFERENCES
