Interactional Research Into Problem-Based Learning

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Published by Purdue University Press

Green, Judith, et al.
Interactional Research Into Problem-Based Learning.
Purdue University Press, 2020.
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SECTION II

NEW THEORETICAL DIRECTIONS AND LEARNING DESIGNS FOR PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

The two chapters in this section address important challenges to problem-based learning (PBL) as we move into the second decade of the 21st century. By addressing these challenges at both the theoretical and learning design levels, the authors also illustrate PBL’s evolution, relevance, and currency half a century after its inception. Savin-Baden synthesizes a body of qualitative research on student engagement in higher education to expand the theoretical foundations of PBL, proposing a set of generic “transdisciplinary threshold concepts.” She also challenges us to regain lost ground in defining higher education in a world of change and argues that this new conceptual framing can support students and facilitators in recognizing and managing key interactional moments, or “portals,” which offer transformational opportunities but are also the key moments at which students become “stuck” in the PBL process. This new conceptual framing, founded on an interactional evidence base, affords new insights into learning in PBL that move from purely epistemological framings to wider sociological considerations of learner identity. In an age when we are making great efforts to bound and constrain curricula, her argument for this reframing has the laudable goal that curricula “should be spaces for meddling with” (this volume, p. 356). Taking up the “meddling” metaphor, Lajoie and colleagues offer new directions for technology-enabled PBL with their development of a learning dashboard called HOWARD
that aims to sustain and promote group interactions at distance and on a larger scale.

Both chapters not only expand the field but also indicate the significant impact on theory building and innovative practices that can occur through the nuanced understandings posed by in-depth, interactional studies into the PBL process.