When many hear the terms problem-based learning (PBL) and online delivery in the same sentence, they immediately become skeptical and believe that the two cannot go hand in hand. Problem-based learning (PBL) is defined as a student-centered instructional strategy in which students collaboratively solve problems and reflect on their experiences (http://www.materials.qmul.ac.uk/pbl/).

The principal aims of implementing PBL are:

- To integrate knowledge and skills from a range of multi-disciplinary modules
- To acquire knowledge through self-study
- To teach students how to work in groups and manage group projects
- To improve and develop the communication skills of the students
- To develop the problem solving skills of the student
- To encourage self-motivation, curiosity and critical thinking skills

Many PBL assignments involve research and in particular, web research. One should seriously consider using PBL assignments within their Blackboard delivered courses.

Why is Problem-Based Learning Effective?

As a firm believer in problem-based learning exercises, I can attest to the effectiveness of PBL. PBL exercises can be particularly effective if well structured. PBL exercises involve students in many different aspects of learning and expose them to real-world situations while learning. Looking at the principles of PBL shows that a student, when exposed to such an exercise, tackles a class project in the same manner that they will when working in a number of different industries and professions after graduation. For example, I attended a problem-based learning seminar recently where we were given three sheets of information on a congressman from a state more than 600 miles away. The first thing I thought was, why? After a couple of steps, I was able to answer my own question, learning a bit about the congressman and his stances. So what you ask? Well, I don’t remember what I learned that day about the congressman, but I do know that I recognized why we were doing that particular exercise. I was asking myself questions, reading questions proposed by the leader, and researching information to find answers to those questions while either leading or following my group members. All good skills that will serve people well in the workplace.

Incorporating Problem-Based Learning Assignments into Blackboard

There are a number of Blackboard tools which can be used to offer and enhance a problem-based or group-based learning assignment online. Some of these include Assignments, Discussions, Chat (Whiteboard), and even any of the content tools that Blackboard provides instructors. I have used the Assignments tool to create group assignments where an assignment is given to a group of students who upload a single submission and each person in the group earns the same score in the gradebook once the assignment is scored. I have also set up discussion forums allowing a group and its members to communicate asynchronously in their own private discussion area. For real-time communication in a true distance learning course, the chat and whiteboard tool can be used to allow students to communicate. One of the goals of a PBL exercise is research, which could include searching course content for information or using a search engine to obtain relevant information.

Summary

No matter what subject you teach, you can incorporate some type of problem-based or group-based learning assignment in your course, even if it is offered completely at a distance or only uses Blackboard as an ancillary component to a traditional course. Problem-based learning can help students be more successful upon graduation as it prepares them for real-life situations in which they work in groups and develop problem solving skills, no matter the subject. Problem-based learning can easily be incorporated into Blackboard using many of the tools provided to its users.