

**AC 2009-998: ON THE NEED TO CHANGE CLASSROOM PRACTICES IN THE ARAB STATES: TRENDS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND FUTURE PLANS**

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# On the Need to Change Classroom Practices in the Arab States: Trends, Opportunities, and Future Plans

## Introduction

This paper is a follow up to prior papers by the author on engineering education reform in the Arab Region of the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the Sultanate of Oman), addressing some vital issues that have been either neglected or have not been sufficiently addressed.<sup>(1-7)</sup> The purpose here is to renew the call for a new and fresh outlook at engineering education in the Region, commensurate with increasing demand for more rounded engineering graduates with the ability to function in a modern business climate. Engineering graduates must have the abilities and the skills to cope with challenges brought about by a highly competitive and global marketplace; and also, are able to develop the capacity to adapt to unforeseen changes that could arise in the future.

The core issue, in author's view, is the mode of teaching and learning that is practiced.<sup>(3, 4, 5)</sup> Learning "about" things does not enable students to acquire the abilities they will need for the twenty first century.<sup>(8,9)</sup> How students approach their education and how the faculty members actually deliver the curriculum is more important than the formal curriculum, that is: its content, collection, and sequence of courses. The thesis here is that current teaching-learning practices in the Region do need overhauling! The real challenge in college teaching today, is not covering the material for the students, but rather uncovering the material with the students. Engaging students in learning is the underpinning that will have enduring values. Therefore, educators, researchers, administrators, and policy makers have to take bold steps and lay out plans for advancing pedagogies aimed at enhancing students' involvement in their learning: those that are classroom-based and predicated on cooperation, and simultaneously, do instigate positive change in college students' academic development, personal development, and satisfaction<sup>(8, 9, 10)</sup>.

The paper focuses particularly on *problem-based learning* (PBL), where selected problems are the vehicle for the development of problem-solving skills and, simultaneously, lead to confidence-building when analyzing and formulating engineering problems<sup>(8, 9, 11)</sup>. In PBL, learning occurs in small student groups, when carefully selected problems are properly posed, and students working together, identify what they need to know, and how to use information to arrive at a solution. The teacher is merely a facilitator, who guides the self-directed learning process, provides advice and support when the need arises, and provides students with training and practice in the social skills required to work cooperatively with others.<sup>(8 - 12)</sup> Engineering faculty may find it necessary to set aside their roles as teachers and instead become designers of learning experiences, processes, and environments.

The paper, *first*, provides an overview of engineering education in the Arab States and sheds light on current classroom practices in the Region. *Second*, the study distinguishes the different types of active learning protocols most frequently discussed in the literature. *Third*, it focuses on

problem-based learning (PBL), examines PBL for potential adoption in Region's colleges, identifies the prerequisites for implementing PBL, argues for the need to "intertwine" PBL with *cooperative learning*, and illustrates the instructor's role in implementing the selected strategy and/or method. Proven methodologies and knowledge generated elsewhere, if and when properly adapted, should make it possible for Region's institutions to devise their own PBL models that meet Region's classroom settings, objectives, and aspirations. *Finally*, the paper examines the nature of such models and argues for the need to conduct research in order to guide the process of transition from the old to the new paradigm, to ensure the vitality and currency of engineering education in the Region.

## **An Overview of Engineering Education in the Arab States**

Engineering education in the Arab Middle East is relatively new, as organized educational endeavors go. It had its early start shortly after World War I. Colleges of engineering (or schools of engineering as they were labeled) were founded then, in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt, and also in Beirut, Lebanon. By the end of World War II, colleges of engineering sprung out in Iraq and Syria. And two decades later, Jordan had its first college of engineering in its capital, Amman. The colleges in Lebanon and Syria paralleled, by and large, the French schools of engineering; except for the American University of Beirut (AUB), typically a North American school, looked after by a consortium representing colleges on the East Coast of the USA. Colleges in Egypt and Iraq were influenced, at the time of their establishment, by the British system of education. <sup>(1, 2, 3)</sup>

Engineering education in the Arab States beamed at here (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the Sultanate of Oman) started, in earnest, during the early to mid sixties. Initially, colleges of engineering were founded in Riyadh, Jeddah, and later, in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. In the other smaller states of the Region, engineering colleges were founded soon after these states have gained their independence. <sup>(1,2,3)</sup> The strong political and economic ties between the States of the Region and western countries- the USA in particular - has helped enormously in setting up, manning, and providing needed guidance to these fledgling institutions during their early years. The dramatic increase in oil revenues during the 70s, and 80s, coupled with lack of skilled professionals in areas deemed necessary for growth and development of oil-related industries of the Region, has been pivotal in the start-up of higher education in general and engineering in particular. There are today eight main public colleges of engineering in the Region (Table 1) in addition to several, recently established, private and semi private colleges and/or universities that offer engineering degrees.

These eight public colleges (shown in Table1), have since their inception, been guided by advisory committees made up largely from experienced faculty members and administrators drawn from US colleges. Previously, the Grinters Report <sup>(13)</sup> and the Goals Report <sup>(14)</sup> have been used to guide the educational process. Recently, ABET Engineering Criteria 2000<sup>(15)</sup> has been the subject of seminars and workshops, intended to shed light and assist engineering colleges in the Region in making use of the EC2000 whenever possible. Indeed, the EC2000 has generated a lot of interest and challenges in the Region. Whether or not it will be fully implemented, would depend on: institutional vision and commitment to reformation, available resources, students' preparedness, and prevailing traditions and norms.

<i>Country</i>	<i>College of Engineering</i>	<i>Year Established</i>
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	King Saud University – Riyadh	Early sixties
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	King Abdul-Aziz University - Jeddah	Early sixties
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) – Dhahran	Late sixties
<b>Bahrain</b>	University of Bahrain – Manama	Mid seventies
<b>Kuwait</b>	College of Engineering and Petroleum at Kuwait University - Kuwait City	Mid seventies
<b>Qatar</b>	University of Qatar – Doha	Early eighties
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	UAE University - Al-Ain	Early eighties
<b>Oman</b>	Sultan Qaboos University – Muscat	Mid eighties

*Table 1. The Eight Main Engineering Colleges of the Arab Gulf Region*

The public colleges of engineering – the eight colleges shown in Table 1 - are part of the public university systems of the Region, and thus are government-run, and almost totally government financed. The organizational structure is nearly the same in all. Students are mostly nationals of their respective countries and graduates of similar public education systems. Admission policies, for all eight colleges, are based on grades obtained in an official examination sanctioned by the Ministry of Education, upon completion of the 12th grade. Additionally, an entrance exam and evidence of proficiency in English, a requirement imposed by many of these colleges, may exempt the applicant from a pre-engineering “prep year” administered as a separate unit from the college. Statistics have shown that over 80% of first year engineering students do attend the “prep year,” during which students embark primarily on improving their English skills<sup>(2,3)</sup>. The author has proposed to reform the “prep year” by making it two years, and widening the scope of the subject matter to include (in addition to building up English language skills to a pre-set level), the following tasks:(i) math and science courses- in preparation for engineering “gateway” courses;(ii) a practical hands-on “pre-college” training period; and,(iii) fostering a “proper learning environment”, to help students acquire desirable attributes such as: analytical skills, curiosity and desire to learn, creative thinking, and the importance of team work<sup>(2,3)</sup>

Thousands of native Arabs (citizens of the Arab Gulf States) have completed their engineering education at one of the eight public colleges (Table 1) of the Region, and have, since their graduation, occupied government positions or joined the private sector, side by side with expatriates. Some have established their own business, and many have moved up the ladder into responsible managerial positions. In a **survey** – conducted in the year 2000-directed at graduates of engineering colleges of the Region on: the *pros and cons* of the engineering education they have received, and any advice they may be willing to offer? **Fifty seven** out of a total of **sixty five** respondents were critical of the classroom environment and teaching styles practiced during their college years. The majority of the respondents- at the time of the survey- were between 25

to 30 years of age, citizens of the Region, and either employed or practicing engineering on their own.<sup>(16)</sup>

The *Survey*, aimed at getting first hand information from the graduates on a number of topics, including: (i) curricula, classroom environment, and *teaching–learning issues*; (ii) alumni–college relations; and, (iii) industry–academe relationships, as perceived by the graduates. Of particular interest here are the remarks made and arguments presented by the respondents, on the need to replace *traditional teaching* that has persisted, with better more effective methods of course delivery.<sup>(16)</sup> Majority of respondents have come to the realization, after having finished college, that learning is not an automatic consequence of pouring information into a student’s head. The process should have an enduring value beyond the classroom! It was also a call for the colleges of the Region to begin transforming learning and teaching, by sponsoring new initiatives that will seed, promote, and encourage faculty to adopt “classroom–based *pedagogies of engagement*”; particularly *cooperative* and *problem-based* learning. This raises a general question: How can the Region, as one entity, promote systematic change to the educational process, taking advantage of the wealth of available information on *teaching and learning*? There is no easy answer. But, developing a new cadre of engineering faculty who are comfortable using novel *engagement strategies* would be a step in the right direction.

### **Teaching/Learning Practices in the Region: Preliminary Findings Launched in 2007**

To get first-hand information on teaching practices and classroom activities in the colleges of the Region, the author traveled - during the spring of 2007- to the Region and was able to meet with faculty members and administrators from different engineering colleges, in an effort to learn about current teaching and learning practices, and instructors’ views on ways to improve the classroom environment in the Region. A total of 24 faculty members responded voluntarily – on a rather short notice - and expressed their views orally, supplemented with written statements. The main headings/questions raised by the author, during the interviews, were:

- Have you been exposed to *active teaching/ learning strategies*, and have you kept up with recent developments in the arena of *pedagogies of engagement*?
- Are you willing and able to deploy any of those strategies (*pedagogies of engagement*) if and when the need arises?
- If you were to select one such *strategy* which one would it be? And why?
- Preliminary information reveals that *strategies of engagement* are not currently utilized in the Region, at any level, Why not?
- Do you believe that *active learning strategies* should be deployed in your department and/or college? And if so, what are the barriers?
- Based on your experience, what would you suggest to add or change in your teaching strategies that would improve the classroom environment?
- What advice would you offer to your university administration and your college and department, that you believe would instigate a change and help improve the classroom environment?

While answers to the above noted questions varied considerably from one member to the next; there were, nonetheless, some agreements amongst many, on certain issues that would be worthy

of consideration. The general consensus of views/opinions expressed by the majority of the faculty interviewed by the author asserts and/or amplifies the following points: **First**, nearly all faculty members have been exposed to one form or another of *active learning* through work shops and seminars offered at their universities' Learning Centers. Some have acquired the knowledge on their own, i.e., through their own personal endeavors. **Second**, all have expressed their wish to learn more about *active learning strategies*; and most do not believe that they are sufficiently competent to deploy an *active learning strategy* as yet; in the courses they will be responsible for in the near future. **Third**, with regard to the strategy they would chose or deploy, the majority had no specific preference, and argued that a specific method is best viewed as "a good choice" only when placed within a context that considers the overall experience and outcome, including: goals and objectives, the nature of the subject, and the capabilities and readiness of the students to embark on a new undertaking. **Fourth**, many have expressed their wish to improve their classroom strategies within the framework of traditional methods, arguing that there is a great deal of room for improvement within the traditional lecture approach. **Fifth**, some members have stressed the point that the success of any *active learning strategy* requires students' active participation, raising the question whether students are ready and willing to become active participants in the process? **Sixth**, most faculty members were mindful of the time and energy required to become a more effective instructor; and, at the same time, apprehensive and concerned that teaching is often undervalued in comparison to research. **Seventh**, many have argued that achieving success in changing the mode of teaching and learning should ideally start in public schools, by building and maintaining a network of schools that implement *active learning strategies* and procedures through out the Region.

The interviewed faculty members have been teaching undergraduate classes at their present institutions for a minimum of five years. Most of the classes taught by the aforementioned faculty are small size, seldom exceeding 35 students per class. The lecture format dominates the seen. Students listen, take notes, and are allowed to ask questions at the end of the lecture or during office hours. There seem to be less interest (by most of the faculty interviewed) in the process by which the course content is delivered during the lecture period, and more of a concern whether the rate of delivery would allow the instructor to finish the course on time. The views expressed by the faculty and the impression(s) arrived at by the author, leads one to believe that it is highly unlikely that new more effective *teaching-learning strategies* would be deployed any time soon, unless drastic measures are undertaken. The author is more convinced now than ever, that classroom reformation, including deployment of *active learning strategies*, would happen only if the institution mandates it!

### **Active Learning: Definitions and Interpretations**

It is difficult to come to grip with all the cited definitions, meanings, and interpretations of the term "*active learning*", since different contributors in the field have interpreted some terms differently. However, by gleaming at the literature, it is possible to arrive at general consensus of what appears to be widely accepted definitions, and to shed light on how common terms are used

*Active Learning* is generally defined as any instructional method that *engages* students in the learning process. It is widely accepted that *active learning* requires students to take part in "pre-planned" learning-related activities, believed to spark and stimulate their learning, while in the classroom.<sup>(17,18)</sup> These activities would include: reading, writing, solving problems, answering

questions, participating in a discussion, etc.; and most important, students must be engaged in thinking tasks while actively involved. It is generally understood that during *active learning*, less emphasis is placed on transmission of information and more on developing students' skills. Additionally, during an *active learning* cycle, emphasis is placed on students' exploration of their own abilities, including: their thinking process, their value system, their intellect, and their courage to express themselves orally and in writing. *Active learning* is contrasted to the *traditional lecture* where students passively receive information from the instructor. <sup>(18, 19, 20)</sup>

*Collaborative Learning* refers to any and all of the instructional methods where students work together in small groups towards a common goal. <sup>(8,9)</sup> It can be viewed as encompassing all group-based instructional methods, including *cooperative learning*. <sup>(9, 20,21)</sup> The central element of *collaborative learning* is collaboration vs. individual work. <sup>(9)</sup> A number of meta-analysis support the view that collaboration does promote a broad range of student learning outcomes. In particular, collaboration enhances academic achievement, and student attitudes. It also reduces student attrition. <sup>(9)</sup>

*Cooperative Learning* is a formalized active learning structure where students work together in small groups to accomplish shared learning goals and to maximize their own and each others learning. The most common model of *cooperative learning* in engineering is that of Johnson, Johnson and Smith. <sup>(10)</sup> This model has five specific elements: mutual *interdependence*, individual *accountability*, face to face *interaction*, *interpersonal* and small group *skills*, and individual *assessment* of group *functioning*. <sup>(10)</sup> Although different cooperative models exist, <sup>(10, 22)</sup> the core element in all of these models is the emphasis on cooperative incentives rather than competition in the promotion of learning. Some researchers view *cooperative and collaborative learning* as having two distinct historical developments and differing philosophical roots. <sup>(23)</sup> Despite differences and similarity of the two approaches (*collaborative vs. cooperative*), the fact remains that the core element of both, is the emphasis on student interactions, as the primary source of learning, rather than learning as individuals.

*Problem-based learning* (PBL) is an instructional method where relevant problems are introduced during the course to provide the context and motivation for the learning that follows. <sup>(24)</sup> PBL, by and large, is self-directed learning that helps develop positive student attitudes, foster a deeper approach to learning, and helps students retain knowledge longer than traditional instruction. It is appropriate here to mention that several approaches go under the name of *Problem-Based-Learning*. These known approaches to PBL have as many differences as they have elements in common, making interpretation of outcome rather difficult. <sup>(25)</sup>

Before adopting a specific method of *active learning*, faculty members need to become familiar with the literature and, in particular, the various strategies that promote *active learning* in the classroom. Despite familiarity with the literature, ambiguity and confusion may result, at times, from reading the literature; particularly when the effectiveness of any instructional method is examined and/or compared with another method. Assessing "what works" requires looking at a broad range of learning outcomes, interpreting results carefully, and quantifying the magnitude of any reported improvement. To assess critically "what works" for a given set of conditions, the reader has to attain sufficient knowledge and familiarity with the subject matter.

Reported studies, by and large, tell us about success stories and seldom reveal what has not worked! Irrespective of how data, results, and interpretations are presented in the literature, faculty adopting a specific method with the expectations of experiencing similar results to those in the literature, should be aware of the limitations of any reported piece of research, i.e., such reports may not reveal all factors and details; and therefore, extrapolating without a thorough investigation could be misleading. This should not, by any means, discourage faculty from moving toward *active learning*; but rather intended as a “precautionary” observation, to new instructors: Not “to make too much” out of what they have read unless it is credible, thorough, and substantiated with facts and figures. Despite some pitfalls, engineering faculty should be strongly encouraged to examine the literature on *active learning*, including: the empirical research on its use, and the common obstacles and barriers that may arise as a consequence of its application.

Problem-based learning is one of the learning strategies that are based on student center learning, and is gaining momentum worldwide. In the sections that follow, the author presents relevant information on PBL and its implementation with a focus on its potential utilization in the states of the Region. The author believes that learning “about” things is not enough to enable students to acquire the skills and abilities they will need in the future. Rather pedagogies of engagement such as PBL will turn out the kinds of resourceful, engaged professionals that the Region will require.

### **Problem-Based Learning: Historical Origin, Precepts, Practices, and Working Models**

The modern history of problem-based learning begins in the early 1970s at the medical school at McMaster University in Canada. Its intellectual history is far older. Thomas Corts, president of Samford University, sees PBL as "a newly recovered style of learning" In his view; it embraces the question-and-answer dialectical approach associated with Socrates as well as the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic <sup>(26)</sup>. As John Cavanaugh puts it: "It's like discovery-based learning in the 1960s. We knew about it; we didn't do it."<sup>(26)</sup> Until recently the PBL approach has flourished mainly in medical and professional schools. Slowly the sciences in general have begun taking it up, and even more slowly, the humanities. PBL does not have a store of transferable techniques or methods like Cooperative Learning, no "jigsaw," no "think-pair-share" or that sort of thing. Opinions vary on whether PBL should be implemented for entire courses or whether it can be used merely to teach certain parts of courses. In general, advocates accept faculty easing into the approach piecemeal, but favor course-long continuity. <sup>(26)</sup>

In some ways what PBL is seems self-evident: it's learning that results from working with problems. Official descriptions generally describe it as "an instructional strategy in which students confront contextualized, ill-structured problems and strive to find meaningful solutions."<sup>(26)</sup> In other words, in PBL, learning results from the process of working toward the understanding or resolution of a problem. The problem is encountered first in the learning process. <sup>(27)</sup> Barrows identifies six core features of PBL. <sup>(8, 28)</sup> These features are: **i)** Learning is student-centered. **ii)** Learning is best accomplished in small groups. **iii)** Problems are the main focus and stimulus for learning. **iv)** Problems are the vehicle for the development and acquisition of problem – solving skills. **v)** Teachers are primarily facilitators of learning. **vi)** New information is acquired through self-directed learning.

The list of reasons for the deployment of PBL includes the fact that problem-based learning (PBL) ends up orienting students toward meaning-making over fact-collecting. Students learn via contextualized problem sets and situations. Because of that, and all that goes with it, namely the dynamics of group work and independent investigation, they achieve higher levels of comprehension, develop more learning and knowledge-forming skills and more social skills as well. This approach to teaching brings prior knowledge into play more rapidly and ends up fostering learning that adapts to new situations and related domains quickly and effectively. According to Woods<sup>(29)</sup> PBL is suitable for introductory sciences and engineering classes –as it is for medicine- because it helps students develop skills and confidence for formulating problems they have never seen before. The largest scale implementation of PBL in the USA at the undergraduate level has been at the University of Delaware, where it has been used for many courses including courses in science and engineering.<sup>(30)</sup> Woods at McMaster University has described the university implementation of PBL in engineering. In the civil and chemical engineering programs at McMaster, PBL is used widely in junior and senior levels.<sup>(29)</sup>

But where does PBL fit compared with all the other "learning methods". Faculty hear about-- "cooperative learning," "collaborative learning," and "active learning"? The proliferation of "learnings" and their attendant partisan camps invites the reawakening of long-standing faculty prejudice against educational fads and "methods." Even so, interest in PBL grows because not only does research show a higher quality of learning (though not a greater amount if "amount" equates with the number of facts), but problem-based learning simply feels right intuitively. It seems to reflect the way the mind actually works, not a set of parlor-game procedures for manipulating students into learning.<sup>(26)</sup> Unfortunately, while there is agreement on the general definition of PBL, implementation has varied widely.<sup>(9)</sup> The large variation in PBL practices makes the analysis of its effectiveness a bit complex. Many studies comparing PBL to traditional programs are simply not talking about the same thing. As reported by Prince<sup>(9)</sup>, "For meta-studies of PBL, to show any significant effect compared to traditional programs, the signal from the common elements of PBL would have to be greater than the noise produced by differences in the implementation of both PBL and traditional curricula." Despite this, there are positive findings that do emerge from the literature, which support the following: i) PBL produces positive student attitudes, ii) PBL does provide more challenging, motivating and enjoyable approach to education, iii) PBL improves the long-term retention of knowledge compared to traditional instruction, and iv) PBL promotes deep learning and problem –solving skills.

**A. Essentials of PBL:** Problem–based learning is a philosophy that has to be adapted to the specific conditions and situation of an institution, and the nature of the specific field in which it is to be implemented. This is apparent in the different models of PBL implementation through out the world. Therefore, there is no *one –size-fits-all* approach to PBL that can simply be implemented from one institution to another.<sup>(31)</sup> There are essential and required steps that have to be mobilized at the start of PBL. At the start of learning in PBL is the selection of real problem(s). This is, in fact, the major driving force for learning. Effort and time dedicated to the selection of problem(s) is time well-spent and will eventually pay off. The problem(s) should be well crafted to engage and immerse students in learning new materials, new issues, as well as challenging existing knowledge, skills, and attitude. It is important to note that PBL is not only about giving problems and solving them in classroom, but it is also about creating opportunities for students to construct knowledge through interactions and collaborative inquiry.<sup>(31)</sup>

In PBL, the instructor is primarily a facilitator, whose role is to make the learning process visible, instead of making the content visible as in traditional lectures. Since assessment drives learning, the modes of assessment must also be modified to appropriately evaluate students for the desired outcomes that have been designed for the problem. For students to become problem solvers, they have to be actively involved in the learning process. When students are exposed to PBL for the first time, they must be guided, prepared and motivated. It is not fair to expect students to readily have the skills for PBL, particularly when they have been exposed solely to traditional classroom environment. Therefore students need to be prepared by exposing them to informal *cooperative learning*, where students are to work together to achieve a joint learning goal in temporary, ad-hoc groups that may last from a few minutes to one class period<sup>(32)</sup>. Informal *cooperative learning* groups also ensure that misconceptions, incorrect understanding, and gaps in understanding are identified and corrected.. Using procedures such as informal *cooperative learning* guarantees that students have been exposed to some active and interactive methods prior to engaging in PBL.

**B. Infusing PBL in the Curriculum:** There are several strategies that may be utilized to infuse PBL in an engineering curriculum. The selected strategy depends upon: 1) the commitment of the institution, as a whole, to the process of deploying active learning schemes in general, and PBL in particular, 2) the readiness of the teaching staff, and 3) available recourses, facilities, and support services. Table 2 illustrates three approaches to infuse PBL in the curriculum as suggested by Tan at the mega, macro and micro levels<sup>(32)</sup>. Implementing PBL at the mega level requires commitment from the administration as well as from the teaching staff. As shown in Table 2, an example of such an implementation is when students acquire their course work in its entirety, during the third or fourth year, by means of PBL. This would undoubtedly require a major revamp of the curriculum, along with realignment of program's objectives and outcomes. At the macro level, certain courses in the curriculum are designated to be taught utilizing PBL, irrespective of who is in charge of the course. A macro implementation requires departmental approval and a firm commitment by the instructors teaching the course. Courses offered in multiple sections require proper coordination between instructors. The micro-level approach requires the least amount of resources and coordination. Its implementation is flexible, non-binding and amendable. This is where PBL can be used on a trial basis for certain topics in a selected course(s) within a certain time limit. Hence, this approach is highly recommended for trying out PBL for the first time.

**C. The Start up of PBL:** A gradual, step at a time approach, should be taken when infusing PBL in a program. At the start, steps should be taken to raise awareness and educate instructors and students on key issues, techniques and potential hurdles that may arise when using PBL for the first time. During this initial period, it is advisable to form a central committee from experienced or semi-experienced lecturers, who are at ease with active learning strategies in general and PBL in particular, to facilitate the promotion of PBL at all levels of the academic community. This is a challenging time that requires patience, persistence, and social skills on the part of the committee members entrusted with the task of embarking on the process- where the committee will be moving against the tide in trying to plant the initial seeds of change. The major tasks that would be undertaken at this stage are: introduce PBL gradually and properly, convince teachers and students of its merits, and help train potential lecturers of when and how to use PBL. As instructors gain familiarity with PBL, they begin to develop their own

techniques. Listening to students can give instructors direction and insight into how well students understand concepts and material being taught.

Level	Range of Application	Details
<b>Mega Level</b>	PBL is applied to the entire 3 <sup>rd</sup> or 4 <sup>th</sup> year of a selected program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major revamp of curriculum</li> <li>• Needed commitment at all levels</li> </ul>
<b>Macro Level</b>	PBL applied to two or three subjects in the 3 <sup>rd</sup> or 4 <sup>th</sup> year of a selected program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need departmental approval and firm commitment from the lecturers teaching the selected subjects</li> </ul>
<b>Micro Level</b>	PBL is applied to specific topics in a selected one or two courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommended for new starters</li> <li>• Will require proper coordination when implemented in courses with multi sections</li> </ul>

Table 2. Different approaches of infusing PBL

### Student Engagement Using Cooperative Learning Structures: A Priority to PBL

As noted earlier, relying solely on the traditional lecture approach, no matter how competent the lecturer is, fails to *engage students in learning* thus indirectly depriving students of learning experiences and opportunities that could only materialize utilizing *engagement strategies*.

Under the umbrella of *engagement strategies*, there are numerous models available to select from, including the models predicated on cooperation - working together to accomplish shared goals. Within *cooperative strategies*, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all group members within the class.<sup>(8,10)</sup> The work by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith<sup>(8,10)</sup> reveals that students exhibit a higher level of individual achievement, develop more positive interpersonal relationships, and achieve greater levels of academic self-esteem when participating in a successful *cooperative learning* environment.

*Cooperative learning* researchers and practitioners have shown that positive peer relations are essential to success in college. The positive interpersonal relationships promoted through *cooperative learning* are regarded by most as crucial to today's learning communities. The underlying precept of *cooperative and problem-based learning* is "interdependence". *Cooperation* is more than being physically near other students. It is actually a state of mind. A willingness to open up to others, exchange information and views with others, and accept the fact that working together is more beneficial to all involved in the exercise. For a *cooperative learning* experience to be successful, it is imperative that the following be integrated into the class activity:<sup>(9, 33, 34)</sup>

- *Positive Interdependence*- Students should perceive that they need each other to complete the planned activity.

- *Face to Face Interaction*- Students should work together in planning, executing, and arriving at conclusions. They should share the work load, and share the credit. Thus promoting each others learning.
- *Accountability*- Each student's role and performance is to be assessed, and the results are those of the group (and for the group). Keeping track of the contribution and knowledge gained by each member could be monitored, as well, by either testing each and every student in the group, or by randomly selecting a group member (or members) to be tested and thus proxy for the group.
- *Sharing known skills*- Students who possess certain skills (examples: computer skills, laboratory skills, data reduction skills, presentation skills) should be willing to pass it on, and/or share it with their group members.
- *Collaborative Skills*- Groups cannot function effectively if members do not have (be willing to learn) or use some needed social skills. These skills include leadership, decision making, trust building, and conflict management.
- *Monitoring Progress*- Groups need to discuss amongst themselves whether they are achieving their set goals; they also need to prioritize the scheduled activities, introduce changes if need be, solicit advice and assistance with the consent of the instructor, and maintain effective working relationships among the members.

Success in implementing *problem-based cooperative learning* is attributable, in large measure, to: proper planning, efforts, dedication, and foresight of the instructor. Experience definitely is a major factor. A proper start for instructors wanting to try any of the *active learning* strategies for the first time (including *problem-based cooperative learning*) is to step into it gradually, and to seek continuous feedback as to how the course is going and how the students feel about it. In addition, he/she can tap into available documented sources, attend seminars/workshops on the subject matter, and discuss planned activities for his/her course with experienced colleagues who can offer constructive comments and advise.

### **The Lecture Format together with Active Learning Strategies**

When asked why he lectures, one faculty responded: “*It is tradition. It was part of my training, and seems to dwell in me and seems like what I should be doing. I feel guilty when I am not lecturing*”<sup>(35)</sup>. This candid statement suggests one of the great dilemmas faced by all who teach at the postsecondary level. Lecturing is virtually synonymous with teaching. It was the dominant method by which we were taught - and it is the method by which most of us teach. When discussing potential change in current *teaching-learning* strategies, many faculty members become defensive, and discussions may quickly degenerate into heated debates where sides are clearly drawn. Over-exuberant advocates of *active learning* have, unfortunately, not been able to persuade the majority of those who have grown accustomed to traditional teaching methods. More efforts and better approaches in persuading the traditionalists appear necessary. Better is an alternative approach that recognizes that one's choice of an instructional method is best viewed as appropriate or inappropriate only when placed within the context that considers the instructor's specific objectives, the complexity of the subject matter, the physical setting of the classroom, and the capabilities of the learners. The challenge is to choose a suitable method at the appropriate time. Understanding the *pros and cons* of the lecture method is a helpful starting point.

Lectures have a number of characteristics that does make them, for the right subject matter, desirable in the classroom. <sup>(35)</sup> It does, to a great extent, depend on the abilities and experience of the lecturer. An able and committed lecturer can accomplish the following:

1. Relate the material proficiently and effectively, in a manner that reflects lecturer's personal conviction and grasp of the subject matter;
2. Provide students with a thoughtful, scholarly role model to emulate;
3. Supplement the subject matter with current developments not yet published, or interject lecturer's own views derived from his/her own experience whenever applicable;
4. Organize material in ways to meet the particular needs of a given audience;
5. Efficiently deliver large amounts of information when the need arises without confusing his/her audience;
6. Underscore key points, simplify complexities, illustrate with facts and figures, and arrive at well "thought-out" conclusions.

In addition, lectures are presumably cost-effective in that they can reach many listeners at one time, they present a minimum threat to students in that they are not required to actively participate, and they provide an advantage for those students who find learning by listening enjoyable<sup>(35)</sup>. As most students will attest, not all lectures or lecturers achieve these goals. Research findings suggest that a number of identifiable attributes must be implemented to make a lecture truly effective. For instance, students remember material presented at the beginning of a lecture better than information presented in the middle or at the end of the lecture. Also, the effectiveness of the lecture varies inversely with the difficulty of the material presented, and listeners retain factual material better when presented in short sentences rather than in long sentences. Speaking extemporaneously is more effective than reading from lecture notes, and it is desirable to change the pitch, intensity, and timbre of one's voice <sup>(36)</sup>. These characteristics presume that the lecturer is an enthusiastic and knowledgeable scholar. But, we realize that most campuses have a few that fit this description, and can be labeled as gifted practitioners who could keep most students interested during the formal 50- minute lecture. Even if it is assumed that most engineering lecturers possess these necessary characteristics, research has shown that *the exclusive use of the lecture in the classroom constrains students' learning*

One of the most important problems associated with *total* reliance on the lecture method is the inability of most students to listen effectively to any lecturer, no matter how skillful, over a sustained period. Research on the learning experiences of college students exposed to straight lecturing found that after an initial settling-in period of a few minutes, students readily assimilated materials for the next five minutes or so. Ten to 20 minutes into the lecture, however, confusion and boredom set in and assimilation fell rapidly, remaining at a low state until a brief period toward the end of the session when students were revived by the knowledge that the lecture would soon be over <sup>(37)</sup>. There are too many reports in the literature on lack of concentration by the audience, even when the lecturer is brilliant and the attendees are highly motivated, including medical students <sup>(11)</sup>. When it comes to "note-taking" during a 50 minute lecture, research has shown that students have noted 40 percent of the content presented during the first 15 minutes, 25 percent of the total content in a 30 minute-period, and only 20 percent during 45 minutes<sup>(37)</sup>. Research also suggests that the relative effectiveness of a lecture depends on the educational level of the audience. "In general, very little of a lecture can be recalled

except in the case of listeners with above average education and intelligence”<sup>(36)</sup>. Even with bright, competent students listening to an interesting topic presented by a knowledgeable speaker, several serious problems remain, including the following:

1. Course content is often presented via lecture in unorganized and uneven fashion. This makes it difficult for students to determine the most important aspects of the lecture (i.e., what’s going to be on the exam?);
2. Many college students do not know how to take effective notes. Although various strategies and formats for effective “note-taking” have been identified. The fact is that “note-taking” is seldom taught;
3. The listening, language, and/or motor skill deficits of some students make it difficult for them to identify important lecture content and write it down correctly and quickly enough during a lecture;
4. Instructors sometimes get off-track from the primary objectives of the lecture. Professors—especially those who really know and love their disciplines—are famous for going off on tangents during lecture. Although getting off-track would break the monotony, it could make it difficult for even the most skilled note-takers to determine the most important content.

For those instructors who would like to go beyond the traditional methods of lecturing, a number of effective strategies promoting *active learning* are available to choose from. If a faculty member is hesitant about selecting one or more of these *active learning strategies* because some questions exist about its comparative effectiveness with the lecture method, he or she should consider the following: research has shown, beyond the shadow of doubt, that these strategies do deliver content as well as lectures while providing diverse presentations that enhances students’ motivation and achievement, and helps in building up desirable personal traits.

### **Concluding Remarks**

On the whole, the intended move towards encouraging instructors of the Region to adopt PBL seems farfetched and difficult to accomplish, especially in the initial stage. This is because time is needed for those undertaking the task to be trained, implement and gain the experience necessary to move the process forward. Time is also needed for other stakeholders to be convinced and provide the support needed to prescribe the change. Most importantly, those promoting the change must be able to show evidence that PBL is effective for engineering education in the Region.

It is highly recommended that an Active Learning Taskforce be formed of experienced faculty, to initiate, infuse, and oversee the progress made. Their determination, patience, and resilience are required to successfully promote College-wide implementation of PBL. Nevertheless, with clear intention, goals and plans of action, coupled with support from the highest level of the University’s key personnel; such a Taskforce plus other core groups, should be able to move the process forward. Success would almost be guaranteed, when a well-coordinated University-wide implementation of PBL is underway in other colleges of the University.

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