

## Observations of Three PBL Groups

Group A consists of new students in their 1<sup>st</sup> term of PBL. The atmosphere in the group seems pleasant, inclusive and encouraging. The tutor, Professor A, knows the students by name and communicates an interest in the students' discussion, even if he is fairly reticent. He uses few words to get the group to work systematically in exploring the problem or patient. At the beginning of the session, students direct their questions to the tutor. Professor A usually redirects their questions and leaves the students to ponder without offering answers or cues. Occasionally, Professor A asks the students to explain their views further or to describe how the mentioned factors might lead to the patient's problems. The students become hesitant the first time this happens. Little by little, however, the students appear more confident and support each other in attempts to explain their views. At the end of the meeting, the students arrive at relevant learning objectives, though formulated in rather broad and general terms.

Group B consists of students at the intermediate level (4<sup>th</sup> term). They are high-spirited with a lively tutor. Professor B is more active in the group process than Professor A. For example, he picks out one student and questions him at length. In between he makes comments on student's response, which the rest of the group obviously appreciates. The group's attention is on Professor B. A few students volunteer comment on what their peers say; and some students elaborate on Professor B's leads. Professor B acutely picks out the issues to be discussed and sometimes draws the conclusions. At the end of the session, Professor B dictates precise learning issues to be studied before the next group meeting. He rounds off the session with a reference to one of his own patients, similar to the one in the problem case, with some hints as to how he handled it. Short comments at his own expense make the students laugh as they pack up to leave.

Group C is at a more advanced level of studies (7<sup>th</sup> term). The group appears strongly engaged in their attempts to explain what has happened to the patient. They question each other and ponder hypotheses. They refer to readings, lectures, and experiences as they work out a common understanding. Their tutor, Professor C, seems as eager as his students. His contributions broaden the discussion and invite reflection. The atmosphere is relaxed but attentive with quick humorous asides. At a point when concentration is threatened by such asides, the tutor quietly intervenes with a question, pulling the attention back on track. Before the learning issues are formulated, the students check one more time if anyone in the group has more to add, accepting that the tutor keeps back. The remaining time is spent on focusing the issues and on discussing how they may cover them before their next meeting.

The question we may ask, after hearing these observations, is whether the tutor's role in each of the PBL groups is in keeping with intentions for problem-based learning. Would each of these tutors be 'certified' if you had a certification process? If not, why not? And how might we better understand each tutor's approach through their pedagogical BIASES? Should one size fit all in the selection and training of PBL tutors?