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Distinguishing Between Facilitating and Coaching in Problem Based Learning: Issues in Problem and Process Authenticity

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There has been a proliferation of recent literature dealing with coaching and facilitating. Within these concepts there is an intersection of notions, such as mentoring, tutoring, scaffolding, and others. In this article, we argue for an increasing emphasis on facilitating (vis-à-vis coaching) with practical implications in terms of problem-based learning (PBL) within higher education. By higher education contexts, we mean learners who are adults and possess a sufficiently rich degree of prior knowledge to be capitalized upon. Traditional instruction is concerned primarily with products and outcomes, whereas coaching and facilitation are targeted at the process-journey and not simply with the outcomes or products of learning. “Masterful coaching is a journey, not just a destination” (Hargrove, 2003, p. 16).

Differences Between Facilitating and Coaching
In this article, we distinguish between coaching and facilitating by the ‘degree of specificity’ in learning outcomes. Coaching and facilitating are crafted in the context of PBL methods. PBL suggests learning situations in which the learning process begins with problems rather than with prescribed content knowledge. We discuss the issue of coaching and facilitating with regard to problem and process authenticity, with the argument that both schools (K–12 and higher education) and professional practice have different types of authenticity. Thus, PBL, when applied to these contexts, should not be confused or misapplied across contexts. Our conjecture is that facilitating—more than coaching—is needed within institutes of higher education, because knowledge is increasingly changing and fluid; and that the ‘degree of specificity’ of learning outcomes within formal instructional settings becomes increasingly less specific.

As we have reflected on the distinctions between coaching and facilitating, we have come to recognize that coaching implies and assumes very specific outcomes and goals, just as swimming, football, and basketball coaches have very clear deliverables for their learners. Coaches are particularly distinctive in spending much time in situated and timely feedback to each learner or performer (Collins, 1996; Laffey, Tupper, Musser, & Wedman, 1999). Feedback is such an integral part of normal life that it goes unnoticed; without feedback to the self, no correction is possible (Collins, 1996; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). The coach’s primary responsibility is to enable the learner to eventually take responsibility for his/her own achievements. Coaching can help the learner to maintain and refine desirable thinking, skills, and behaviors already acquired.

Facilitating, on the other hand, is less focused on specific outcomes, competencies, and skills to be achieved in learners, but specializes in guiding learners towards shared constructions of meanings. In this sense, the objectives within the facilitating framework are less prescriptive than with coaching. A good facilitator capitalizes on the current situation and context of the group and leads the group toward goals and outcomes which may be somewhat dictated by the group members themselves. Within facilitating, though, providing feedback is also integral.

In the next few sections, we attempt to situate coaching and facilitating in the context of authentic learning experiences and PBL.

Issues of Authenticity and PBL
In the recent literature, one emphasis in educational technology or learning environments is the issue of authenticity—that is, to enable the learner to have an authentic or as realistic a learning experience as possible. In this regard, many attempts have been made to model or ‘mirror’ the real-life experiences of professional practice in the real world and to transfer as far as possible these experiences to the schools in order to foster in students similar ‘authentic’ experiences.

Recently, educators and researchers, such as Petragna (1998), have argued that such an approach is not “authentic” at all, in that it assumes that such a
transfer of real-life problems from professional practices to schools presupposes that similar contexts are also transferred. It also assumes implicitly that the authenticity of the real world is superior to the authenticity of the school. Constructivism instead assumes an emerging construction of meanings from the learner’s perspective (‘inside’) because it assumes that there is no ‘outside’ external reality but merely interpretations of external reality. In this sense, learners within schools (as a context) can construct meanings as emerging interpretations, and these constructions should be perceived as authentic experiences, without the external imposition that such an authenticity (school-based) is somehow inferior to the real world. Our hypothesis is that facilitating (vis-à-vis coaching) is more appropriate to constructivism and the emerging perspectives arising from learners’ own constructions. Alternatively, as applied to coaching, the coach has a clear conception of the goal, and works with the learner to reach that goal or specific outcome. In this sense, authenticity of the learning experience is ‘outside’ the learner—that is, a prescribed goal is imposed from the external ‘outside’ reality of known expert behavior.

PBL takes account of how students learn. It is becoming increasingly apparent that learning takes place most effectively when students are actively involved and learn in the context in which knowledge is to be used. This notion that learning should occur in the context in which knowledge is used connotes the real world, or professional practice, through which the knowledge is appropriated. The problem is encountered first in the learning process, before any preparation or formal study has necessarily occurred. The problem is presented in the same way that it would present itself in reality. The real-life cases around which problem cases are constructed must represent both the breadth (reflected in the range of cases chosen) and the depth (reflected in the number of different cases which show the applications of the same concepts) of professional practice.

We are suggesting that problem based learning can be distinguished by two dimensions: problem authenticity and process authenticity. By problem and process authenticity, we are advocating that the ‘start’ (problem) and ‘journey’ (process) toward the solution or solutions need not be prescribed, but that a number of alternative paths of reaching the solution can be sought by collaborative problem solving. In this sense of problem and process authenticity, facilitating toward outcomes and goals can be less prescribed from the outside. By problem authenticity, we are suggesting that problems can be authentic to the learners if they come to develop ownership of the problem. By process authenticity, we suggest that the learners undergo a constructive and collaborative process in working out the problem.

When problems are ‘transferred’ into the school context, the full professional practice context has not been transferred. Thus, with the proliferation of PBL as an effective instructional strategy, there seems to be a dualistic notion of learning (incongruent to constructivism) where problems are imposed from the outside (the real world). In this sense, educators have misunderstood the need for problem authenticity from the emerging perspective of their learners’ own constructions of meaning.

The process authenticity tenets of PBL, when applied to school contexts, are as follows:

1. Students work with the problem in a manner which permits their ability to reason and apply knowledge to be challenged and evaluated, in a manner that is appropriate to the current level of learning.
2. The facilitator uses stimulus material to help students discuss an important problem, question, or issue.
3. Needed areas of knowledge are identified as the problem is explored.
4. Students are encouraged to pose their own questions and seek the respective answers.
5. Students work cooperatively as a group or collaboratively at a common task, exploring information in and out of class, with access to a necessary subject expert and/or technical support expert who knows the problem well and can facilitate the group’s learning process.
6. Students identify their own learning needs and appropriate use of available resources.
7. The facilitator assumes a pivotal role, monitoring the quality of the students’ understanding of concepts and issues through a formative process throughout the larger PBL process.
8. The facilitator appropriately guides students’ critical thinking and provides limited resources to help them learn from defining and attempting to resolve the given problem.
9. Students reapply this new knowledge to the original problem and evaluate their learning processes.

The above nine processes are novel in terms of learning experiences and as a process-authentic journey for students. But this process authenticity is different from the authenticity of professional practice. The school’s process authenticity is authentic in its own right. We need to distinguish between the two communities—school and professional practice. From the above nine points, it would be evident that process authenticity is advocated in that the facilitator attempts to assist the learners to undergo a collaborative problem solving process authentic to each learner.

In Barrows’ (1988) conception of PBL in medical schools, medical students are exposed to real-life medical cases in the context of professional practice.
constructions of competencies and outcomes to be achieved. This is done either by constructing problems inherent to the needs of the learners or finding ownership of real-life problems acquired from professional practices. Such an appropriation process can also be perceived as ‘psychologizing’ (adapting and identifying with the problem at least cognitively) the problem to the learners’ needs. Such a facilitation process is to create problem authenticity for the learner by situating problems in the context of schooling, which we have argued has a different authenticity compared with professional practice.

4. The process authenticity achieved in the context of schooling should be noted as different from the context of process authenticity in professional practice. The two process authenticities should not be equated. We fundamentally recognize that there is a role for schooling, and attempts to compare the authenticity value of schools to professional practices are unwarranted. Both have their place in learning.

To our minds, it seems that an increasing degree of facilitation is needed, particularly in higher education, because of the continuously uncertain nature of knowledge and outcomes. As such, there is an increasing need for schools to practice constructivist orientations, implying students’ co-constructions of problems and ‘realities.’ Process authenticity is important, as the skills and interpretive dispositions developed among learners are important. To facilitate student independence and foster critical thinking and self-directed, continued learning, the facilitator should guide students at the metacognitive level (Barrows, 1988).

**Conclusion**

Facilitating, more than coaching, within PBL offers a different slant in supporting learning and instruction as compared with traditional forms of instruction. The many problems we face resulting from rote learning paradigms and other top-down ‘transmissional’ approaches result in the perceived lack of thinking among students. At a different level of thinking, we can design curriculum and learning environments to support learning instead of merely prescribing content and curriculum in order to “teach” the learners. From a Vygotskian perspective (Vygotsky, 1926/1991), the learner, the facilitator, and the environment need to be dynamic and constantly in situ. Nothing passive exists, but all processes are active and constantly demanding interactivity and change. Vygotsky’s comments are particularly relevant to the changing contexts and fluidity of knowledge in our times.

We conjecture that in higher education, there is an increasing need for facilitation. In this sense, there is a
need to raise the awareness among professors and lecturers in institutes of higher education to be facilitators. Where outcomes are specific because the community of practice has very established skills and competencies to be developed in learners, such as doctors’ skills in particular case situations, coaching should be adopted. However, we are increasingly pressured by problems and situations where cases arising are less specific or prescribed (such as SARS or bird flu); thus, facilitating learners towards constructing criteria and multiple alternatives to problems. In such situations, facilitating is advocated above coaching. The facilitator, as contrasted with the coach, needs a tolerance for uncertainty and to guide learners through uncharted territories.

Finally, going well beyond schooling, coaching or executive coaching (Hargrove, 2003) is gaining popularity and repute as a very necessary leadership strategy in order for businesses to stay competitive. We are suggesting that perhaps facilitating should be a more accurate description to denote the need to guide business leaders to remain competitive in these unpredictable and changing business landscapes.

References


Suggested Readings


Although this book dwells primarily on a counseling perspective, its “skilled-helper” model can be applied to any facilitating-coaching situation. The approach basically begins with participants relating in story form the problems they have faced. The skilled-helper then attempts to identify blind spots and tries to leverage the issues at hand. The skilled-helper is engaged in an exploration of possibilities and attempts to recommend a change agenda. Commitment is required by the participant to engage in possible strategies to solve their problems, and to identify which strategies are a best fit for the individual. A plan and follow-up actions are subsequently arranged. These processes are particularly useful for coaching as a strategy, but also for facilitating, because solutions can be quite unpredictable.


Masterful coaching is about transforming lives and organizations. Its approach centers on concepts such as forming strong partnerships, coaches committing much time and effort in advising the learner-performer. Masterful coaches are also required to form shared goals with the performer to lead the person to concrete actions. The masterful coach attempts to lead the performer to heights never climbed before. The book provides many tips and strategies for how to become a masterful coach. The approach adopts central methods, such as conversations, story-telling, goal-setting, mental models, and other “empowering-the-learner” strategies.


This excellent book lays the foundation for the field of design in an increasingly unpredictable world of constant change. It is a book for designers of all walks, enabling them to understand the foundations and fundamentals for design work. The authors differentiate this field from traditional scientific epistemologies and reductionist philosophies. Design is focused on the “real” world rather than on the “true” and “ideal”-transcendent world. Design is triggered by human intention, and the designer engages in a service-disposition in establishing a client-designer “yin-yang,” symbiotic relationship. Because such a relationship can lead to unpredictable outcomes—or beyond the expected outcomes—it is congruent to our emphasis on facilitating. The design philosophy focuses on interrelated systems thinking, rather than disparate thought.


This book articulates the deep importance of facilitation. Facilitation is cast in the context of organizations and is used to assist groups of team members to unlock problems and misunderstandings within themselves. Problems within teams could be based on explicit understandings but, more significantly, on beliefs and assumptions which need to be uncovered. Facilitation also includes helping group members to handle negative emotions and to keep teams moving toward goals.