

Group work in problem-based learning: Democratic spaces or oppressive places?

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One of the major hallmarks of problem-based learning (PBL) is collaborative learning within small group settings. Group work in PBL is generally perceived as good and is often applauded in the PBL literature but it has not, hitherto, been examined in terms of the way in which power is manifested through group dynamics and how this might influence learning. In this paper, Foucault's theory of power, as in "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison", is used as a conceptual framework for deepening an understanding of PBL group work. For Foucault, it is not a person who has a hold on power, rather it is *visibility* that assures the hold of power: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power". Specifically, this paper examines what constitutes the PBL "gaze" and how it holds students in subjection. In order to examine the manifestation of power through surveillance (or gaze) within the context of PBL group work, a mixed method approach was adopted in this research and involved quantitative studies (self-administered questionnaires) as well as qualitative studies (document analysis, reflective journal entries and observations of PBL tutorials). The study draws on data obtained from a cross-continental higher education context encompassing South Africa and the UK. The researcher describes how PBL group work can be perceived as a threatening, oppressive place where members are under constant surveillance, and how this could stifle learning. The findings could also be applicable to other forms of collaborative learning.