

**Professional Development Tools**  
**Facilitating Student Groups In Your Adult Basic Education Program**

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**Topic:**  
**Problem Based Learning**

**WHAT IS IT?**

Problem Based Learning (PBL) is simply “learning that results from working with problems” where the students can “confront contextualized, ill-structured problems and strive to find meaningful solutions.”<sup>i</sup> It has similarities to cooperative, collaborative, and active learning strategies. The research behind PBL shows that the quality of learning is higher as it “seems to reflect the way the mind actually works.”<sup>ii</sup>

The teachers and the learners are on a more equal playing field with PBL. The learners can teach and the teachers can learn in this educational experience that is not as hierarchical as traditional classrooms. This is why it could be a helpful model for your student groups.

**HOW DO YOU DO IT?**

**Break into smaller groups.** Your student group would need to be divided into smaller groups of three to five people per group. The groups will stay in tact for a specific period of time, often, the duration of the class if its not open ended.

**Assign the problem:** Each small group is given one problem at a time with a particular framework or set of rules in which they are to solve the problem. Examples of problems could be:

- a) Come up with an idea for business using the skills and experiences of the members of the group.
- b) Leave a legacy. Select a group or situation in your community where you could help and make a difference.
- c) Improve something. Select a product or a place (perhaps the ABE classroom) and ask each group to come up with ideas for improving it.
- d) Use some of the questions from the sample GED tests. Be creative!

**Provide timeframe and ground rules:** Be clear with the group what the parameters are for solving the problem. Is this competitive? Is it to be completed in one session? One month? Is it ok to ask questions? Share resources? Perhaps these issues can be the first problem solved as a group?

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**Guide the Groups In Determining What Is Needed:** The group must define the learning issues that are significant to solving the problem. This could be framed in a question by you, the facilitator as “What information or skills do you need to have to solve this problem?”

**Provide Resources:** Help the students learn how to access the library or community resources available to solve the problem.

**Process:** At the end of each gathering, help the group process the concepts and skills they are learning. Ask questions of the group and allow time to have them answer and talk as a group. A good way to start this is to sit in a circle and ask each person to share one thing they learned from working on this problem.

#### Additional Resources on Problem Based Learning

- An article titled “Literacy and Learning” is an excellent resource by Judith Newman. It can be found at <http://www.lupinworks.com/it/pbl.html>.
- The University of Delaware has articles on PBL in higher education: [www.udel.edu/pbl/](http://www.udel.edu/pbl/).

#### ADAPTING PBL FOR YOUR PROGRAM

Would PBL work with your student group? Talk about this concept with your staff or colleagues. How could it be adapted to help your students build community and hone their critical thinking skills? What problems would be most effective to put before the student groups? Should you give them a choice or select one problem?

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<sup>i</sup> James Rhem, The National Teaching & Learning Forum, Volume 8, Number 1, 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.