**MEMO**

Date: November 4, 2020

To: Dr. Beverly Shaklee

From: Stephanie Mikulasek

RE: Self-Evaluation of the PBL Process

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**Introduction**

This Memo summarizes both my analysis of the Problem Based Learning (PBL)-2 process and offers a self-evaluation based on the pre-established rubric. In general, I found this second PBL process more difficult than PBL-1, but I remain optimistic of its value to learning.

**Analysis of Process**

This two-week PBL assignment offered some prescriptive instructions (roles of students, readings, general instructions), but leaned on the students to decipher the parameters, craft a response, and defend that response. As mentioned in my analysis of PBL-1, I am familiar with this process in my work at USAID as we seek to identify a primary challenge and then craft responses to that challenge. It seems relevant to directly quote from my first analysis as I reflected on the connection between development and a PBL-like process:

*“Almost without exception, our analysis of the problem is incomplete. A broad number of ‘problems’ or challenges exist; what matters in our work is to discern where best to start, what variables we need to keep in mind, who the stakeholders are, what research is needed or available, and what assumptions we are making. Moreover, as much as we may try to calibrate our problem statement with a response (we hesitate to use the word “solution”), we design and implement activities aware that a variety of responses to the challenge are possible. We only have chosen the one we think will work most effectively within our budget to respond with the knowledge we have at that time.” (*Mikulasek: PBL-1 Self Analysis Memo)

This previous reflection is important because coincidentally, PBL-2 asked us to assess the role, viability and sustainability of international development – questions I’ve been addressing for 25 years. Therefore, my particular role in this process was markedly different, which I’ll discuss in the following section. As for the process, our group seemed to struggle particularly with synchronous time availability. The challenge of time was further complicated by an observation that this PBL topic seemed overwhelming for the group. The group seemed to be lost in the breadth of the international development field, even unaware of how to use terms appropriately, which further confused the team. As a result, whereas in PBL-1 the challenges were largely linked to group dynamics and the uncertain environment of a non-linear process (here is the problem, now craft a solution), in PBL-2 an additional challenge was layered on the group, namely an unfamiliar, broad topic.

The consequence was that Week #1 was not particularly productive. Like in PBL-1, the group wanted to find a solution to the questions presented, but as they grappled with the questions, I observed a process moving from confidence to exploration to despair to rapid solution-finding. This despair – feeling overwhelmed, unsure of the information presented – created stress, which led to a desire to quickly craft a solution without fully understanding the underlying problem; this stress was largely driven by feeling time constraints to reach possible solutions within a week. At the beginning of Week #2, I asked the group to clarify the problem identified. This inquiry led to a series of conversations on unpacking the problem once again, and re-thinking both the approach as well as the proposed solutions. As recently as Saturday of Week #2, the problem and proposed solutions were still being discussed. The lack of time to cover a broad and unfamiliar topic seemed to press on the group until ultimately each member pulled together to finish the Memo by Monday evening.

**My Involvement**

Once the PBL was announced, Dr. Shaklee and I exchanged emails about my role, which was greatly appreciated given my background in the topic. We agreed that I would serve as Inquirer during Week #1, and Recorder during Week #2. My job would not be to provide answers, but rather prod and probe the group’s thinking with questions. A few days into Week #1, the group noted I was not asking questions of the topic, but rather of *their thinking* on the topic, which led someone recalling I work at USAID. The group’s reaction initially was neutral (I was a “ringer” in the group), but I felt a growing desire for me to “just explain the problem” as frustration grew with the process.

In Week #2, it was clear the group was struggling to identify the problem some 10 days into the 14-day PBL process, and furthermore, their proposed solutions were not connecting to the proposed problem. Ultimately, I decided to lean into the group discussion and help the group decipher a possible problem and suggestions on how to frame the approach in responding to the problem. My involvement therefore greatly increased, and I was mixed about inserting myself at that point; on the one hand, I felt a responsibility to my colleagues to provide more guidance and a mini-crash course on development so that they could navigate the material more constructively in a very short period of time. On the other hand, was my insertion taking away learning? Was part of the learning to not “get it”? I remain mixed as to what was the right path. Another complication was feeling both colleague, peer, and teacher; is it appropriate to teach some of what I know to my peers so that they might learn about a new field, particularly when I observe the struggle? Or was I stepping into the conversation too much? The feedback I heard from a couple of colleagues was they wished I could have given a crash course in development from the beginning, to teach them, and then invite them to work through the PBL. It’s difficult to say what was the right approach.

Interestingly, reflecting on PBL-1, I recognize I struggled with something similar during that process. In that first PBL, I also took a more back seat role initially, although in that case to hold back my leadership tendencies. In the second week in PBL-1, I too inserted myself more when I asked the group to step back and reconsider the underlying issues presented in the PBL. Perhaps another dynamic occurring in both PBLs is that the PBL process does not feel foreign to me, but it seems to remain uncomfortable for many of my team members.

**Barriers to Solution Finding**

We encountered several barriers. First, beyond having sufficient time in busy schedules, the group faced the challenge of synchronous time availability. One of our peers lives ten time zones from DC, which further complicated finding time together; teacher schedules were also widely varied, and my time in the past few weeks has been sharply curtailed. Second, the topic of the PBL was daunting for the group. “Foreign Aid” or “International Development” or “Sustainability” are massive, complicated, complex topics with a unique vocabulary, discipline and art. The group had a very difficult time deciphering underlying issues; I noticed a strong tendency to take an issue raised in the readings as “the” core issue rather than seeing the reading as reflective of one particular author’s perspective. (This was an important lesson for me to recognize readings are only offering one perspective on one component of a dilemma – and that perspective may be a tangent, not the core issue.) Third, the terms used in development are familiar words, but are used distinctly as terms of art. For example, the group decided the solution was to generate a development strategy as a response. However, when I reviewed the responses from each member, I saw a variety of approaches on how to do development. A “development strategy” is not the same as a “development approach.” (I decided to briefly explain the difference, which I think helped the group eventually identify a problem statement.) Another challenge was some apathy toward the PBL process. I sensed exhaustion among the group members, which translated into issues of motivation and inspiration.

**Judgement of the Group Solution**

Our proposed solution was one approach to a complicated issue. The group proposed, following a poll vote, on three components necessary to a guiding framework when fostering self-reliance in international development. The first component was country-led development, which has been shown to increase partner commitment and accountability, and allow for the assistance to be tailored to the particular context and culture (OECD, 2011; Ogbuoji & Yamey, 2018; United Nations, 2018). The second component was inclusivity of marginalized groups, which both increases sustainability (Fonchingong & Fonjong, 2002; Ite, 2016), and fosters opportunities in education, economic growth, and increased human capacity for all to build self-reliance (USAID, n.d.). The third component was incorporating a wide variety of stakeholders in a participatory approach, including the private sector, bilateral and multilateral donors, foundations, impact investors, and others, in part because of decreased government funding for development (Black & O’Bright, 2016; Stadtler, 2016; USAID, 2018).

This proposed solution of a guiding framework anchored by three components was good, but insufficient. I would not have chosen the second anchor as essential in development, for example. Full inclusion is critical, but sometimes development begins with a particular group of beneficiaries rather than all types of beneficiaries. I also found it fascinating that the group did not identify “education” as a core component of sustainable development. This point is particularly interesting to me given this course is called “International Education,” and that I spend considerable time at USAID emphasizing the role of education as essential for any other type of development implemented.

**Self Evaluation**

Using the presented rubric, my self-assessment would be the following:

**Inquiry Skills**

I would assess my skills during this PBL as very good to excellent – an improvement from my first PBL. As the bulk of my role was as Inquirer, I focused on asking questions and probing ideas and comments. At times I allowed for consensus to form, and then would ask another question. I believe I can evaluate the appropriateness of sources consistently, and I continue to improve my research skills and grasping the main ideas of multiple articles.

**Knowledge Building**

My self-assessment in knowledge building is similar to PBL-1. Because I know the topic of this PBL well, I was able to quickly read articles and connect what the author proposed to a body of knowledge in my head. Further, I personally know a couple of the authors presented (George Ingram at Brookings is someone I have worked with on several occasions, for example), and so I am intimately familiar with some of the thinking in the readings. However, a constant challenge is time. These past several weeks in pre-election season has required extensive attention at work, which has frustrated my desire to deepen my knowledge. My aspiration continues to be spending more time reading, learning, writing, and contributing to this field.

**Problem Solving**

I am a very good problem solver. I used these skills in Week #2 when I helped guide the group to re-think the vocabulary they were using, the problem statement, and the proposed solutions. I was careful not to “give” answers, but rather point to frameworks to help their thinking.

**Team Skills**

Like in PBL-1, I feel this area is my strongest area. I talked separately and together with the group during this PBL, and I believe my continued enthusiasm, commitment, and focus on group goals has helped us move forward through this process. I continue to treasure such diverse opinions and perspectives in this group, and look forward to much more time together.

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