

Updating PBL at FASoS

A project within the “Back to Basics – Leading in Learning” framework

Final Project Report

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Executive Summary

This report is the result of a one-year project about the strengths and challenges of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as applied at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) at Maastricht University. The project, which is a part of the University wide ‘Leading in Learning’ initiative, aimed at mapping what PBL means for FASoS staff, establishing the main aspects that we consider as crucial for this constructivist approach of learning. Furthermore, the project aimed at recognising and understanding the strengths and challenges of our current PBL practices.

During the last academic year we communicated extensively with various staff members in structured interviews, questionnaires, focus groups. We presented the first results of this report at the FASoS education day in June 2011. In this regard this year provided us with the unique opportunity to experience the remarkable enthusiasm and dedication of our colleagues for teaching and working with their students. Furthermore, we got to know various inspiring ways of how colleagues have experimented and improved the PBL-method during the last years.

In this way our faculty lives the spirit of PBL every day: knowledge and the way of dealing with knowledge are not fixed; there is not THE one solution, but learning and teaching how to learn are a constant process that is in flux. A process that asks for constant movement, changes, adaptations – and time and again for reflection. This is what makes our faculty and our teaching approach unique but also inherits a considerable danger of exhausting and tiring processes. Those processes are not always easy to deal with, but in a collective effort they have a strong potential for resulting in a sustainable and engaging way of sharing our knowledge with students.

Our results are mixed: there is dedication and general agreement that PBL offers the “better way” of learning, especially in comparison to the more traditional ways of knowledge transfer. There is general agreement on what constitutes the central elements of PBL, like student ownership of the learning process, interaction and learning in small groups, topical problems as a starting point; There is also a strong agreement on the strengths of the PBL system: it fosters ownership and self-responsibility of students, it provides an active and stimulating learning process, it trains and enhances important skills and the ability for teamwork; Staff members enjoy working in small groups and to witness their students’ progress, and they enjoy the role as facilitator rather than lecturer.

Yet, staff members are also strongly aware of the challenges that they are confronted with. Many things work well, yet no one would say that we have the perfect system. Yet, it was remarkable to see that staff members continuously try in their own ways to tackle those perceived challenges in a variety of approaches. Lots of time and energy is therefore spent to adapt and update and to try different ways. Interestingly we found to our surprise that it is exactly those elements that are identified as PBL strengths that are considered as challenges by staff members as well: the different role of the tutor, group dynamics, the challenge of skills; Additionally it surprised us that during many interviews also more general issues were emphasised: there are obviously also structural challenges that are not specifically elements of a PBL environment but that nevertheless have a direct impact on our teaching practice, like the need for a clear and continuing communication about the rationale of the programme structures, the difficulty of communicating efficiently, the challenge to create connections and synergy between teaching and research, and last but not least important, scarcity of time for reflection on various levels.

Reflecting on those perceptions of staff members we observed five pairs of tensions underlying the aims and ambitions of our teaching. Making them explicit may help in structuring the debate and deliberation on our teaching approach.

We end the report with suggestions for improvement, which are clustered around five general recommendations. They are not intended to be read as clear cut solutions, but rather as attempts to initiate discussion and contribute to the ongoing effort to adapt and improve the quality of our teaching. We hope that the results of this report will support the positive attitude towards teaching at our faculty.

1. Our Project Plan

At Maastricht University, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is the overall teaching and learning approach throughout all faculties, programmes and disciplines. Also at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) PBL is considered as the integral learning approach throughout all programmes.

However, what exactly does PBL mean for FASoS? How do we apply PBL and what elements and characteristics are considered as the central elements in the daily teaching and learning practice? Moreover, where and when does PBL work, and what obstacles do staff and students encounter in their daily interaction, especially considering the changing environment? Those are the kind of questions that this project started off to answer.

The **proposed aim** of the project was to raise insights in PBL practices as applied in our faculty and to make useful and concrete recommendations for strengthening our PBL system. The establishment of a ‘SW(OT)’ analysis of the two Bachelor Programmes at FASoS allows scrutinizing and reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of using PBL in the Bachelor Arts and Culture/Cultuurwetenschappen (BA AC/CW) and in the Bachelor European Studies (BA ES).

The rationale underlying this analysis is that PBL worked well for many years, but that we should ask ourselves to what extent we have to adapt our PBL practice to the contextual changes that have taken place throughout the years at FASoS. To what extent does the PBL system as applied at FASoS need revitalization? To be able to answer this question it deemed necessary to first start with an analysis of the current PBL practice – which is the main focus of this project.

The project is funded by the University wide ‘Leading in Learning’ initiative, while its organization and content are developed independently at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Therefore, in September 2010 a project group was established to implement the proposed aim bringing together three different staff members with different backgrounds, Ulrike Brunotte, Heidi Maurer and Mirko Reithler.

After considering the proposed aim and our experiences at FASoS, we decided to implement our project in a way that would allow us to achieve the **following objectives**:

- What does PBL mean for us (in practice)? Therefore, to get a general overview of the way in which teaching of our Bachelor programmes is organized and to explore the various ways in which PBL is put into practice on an everyday basis at our Faculty.
- To recognize and understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of our current PBL practices, as assessed by FASoS staff members.

We considered our main task in terms of mapping perceptions and experiences of FASoS staff members: in collecting and compiling ideas about the essential features of PBL, the encountered difficulties, the kinds of solutions that have been developed, and the challenges and concerns that have been identified. In this regard we want to stress that our project is *NOT about passing judgment on individual elements* of our programmes. Rather, the project should help in sharing the valuable experience with PBL of all the different groups which are involved in making it happen (programme directors, coordinators, tutors, and to a certain extent students). At the same time, it was one of our first findings that it is not possible (and also not appropriate) to distinguish and separate PBL as a teaching method from the content and organisation of our teaching. Yet, despite this ramification, our project is still NOT about evaluating the existing programmes.

By doing so, this project aspires to make implicit aspects of our PBL practice more explicit and to provide a first forum for dialogue and sharing of experience. That way, it hopes to contribute to an open and stimulating debate on the quality of our teaching.

This report is **structured** as following:

In part 2 we provide a brief overview of our activities in terms of collecting the empirical material that this report is based on.

Part 3 presents the core empirical results of our project: First we discuss the aspects that staff members agree upon as being the *crucial elements* of PBL. In a second step, we present the perception about the *strengths* of PBL as applied at FASoS, before we thirdly map the *challenges* that staff members report to be encountering in their daily work within a PBL environment. Finally, we also provide an overview of the *suggestions* that staff members have of how to overcome the earlier identified challenges.

In part 4 we use the gathered impressions of staff members to take a next step in *interpreting* those collected materials. In comparison to the mapping exercise in part 3, this fourth part provides our individual assessments of what the results show us, and in the end we present *what kind of tensions we observe* that staff members might want to consider when revitalising PBL. Beside the common work of all three of us Ulrike Brunotte played a special role in the group because, as a very new member of the Faculty, with a thirty years long experience in university teaching in different countries of Europe and in the USA, she was chosen to combine her in-depths interviews of staff members and student groups with *reporting her own fresh impressions* of PBL and the structure of the BA-programme (of AC/CW). Thus we agreed to put a special part of her report of *challenges and suggestions* in our report, however knowing well, that there is much overlapping with our common results about *challenges*.

Concluding in part 5 we outline suggestions for potential future avenues that we would consider as interesting to support the updating of the PBL practice at FASoS.

2. What Did We Do

In September 2010 a project group was formed of three FASoS staff members: Ulrike Brunotte, Heidi Maurer and Mirko Reithler¹. The aim was to bring together staff members with different background and experiences.

After few orientation meetings during which we discussed on how to gather the relevant data for our project, we decided that in order to acquire a comprehensive picture our activities should target different levels of roles of staff members and students:

- managing and designing positions (director of studies, members of course planning group, coordinators)
- implementing positions (tutors, lecturers, students)

Those categories are not about the position of staff members per se, but about the various roles that they fulfil. Therefore, some staff members might also fulfil different roles at different times in their teaching activities.

¹ Dr. habil. Ulrike Brunotte is Associate Professor in the Department of Literature and Art. She works there as a coordinator and tutor of the Minor “Crucial Differences” and several other courses since January 2010. She is a Senior scholar with a long teaching experience in European countries and the USA.

Heidi Maurer joined the Department of Political Science as lecturer in August 2008, worked as tutor in various courses in the BA ES and as coordinator for the first year course “EU politics”.

Mirko Reithler is a FASoS alumnus. He has tutored in many courses of the AC/CW BA programme and he coordinated a course of the Cultures of Knowledge and Technology specialization.

Again, it should be emphasised that the central aspect of this project is not about evaluating the practices and work of faculty members, but to collect their experiences in a structured way and to make some of their assumptions explicit. To ensure a productive and unbiased atmosphere, we guaranteed strict anonymity to all interviewees. We are very thankful for the open and generous way they shared their experiences, thoughts and daily practices with us.

The data collection was done in various ways. We started with various sets of semi-structured interviews (12+4+8), with selected staff members that took place between November and June 2011. In these interviews we especially focused on the interviewees' perception of the key aspects of PBL, and their assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the PBL practice as applied at FASoS.

To complement the data collection of bilateral interviews and in order to reach a wider range of staff members we designed a short questionnaire (9 content questions with 7 open questions and 2 categorised questions). In total we had a response of 32 returned questionnaires. The open answers were afterwards categorised by us in order to be able to get a better overview and to present the collected data.

In addition, two focus group discussions were organised with 5 and 4 junior staff members respectively, during which our participants shared experiences, good practices and other ideas about how they experience PBL in their implementation in the tutorials. While our attempt to collect new data focused especially on staff members' experiences, students' concerns were incorporated by taking into account various round tables that had been organised by our faculty² and by relying on several group evaluation rounds with BA students. Last but not least, we also used reports from previous projects³ and other literature on PBL to complement our research findings.

Guaranteeing anonymity to our colleagues allowed for an open and unbiased atmosphere. We do not refer to names of respondents when presenting the gathered empirical data. The tables and graphs presented in the report are cumulated data from the questionnaires, yet the categories were established by us after receiving the answers to our open questions. This way we aimed at allowing for openness in terms of answering, while the categorisation is necessary to grasp the variety of answers.

The data presented in the proceeding part 3 show the perceptions and opinions of staff members, while our task here was to structure and provide categorisations to guide the reader better through the various aspects of the perception of Problem-Based Learning at FASoS. Only in part 4 we took the opportunity to interpret the results according to our own understanding.

² Minutes from European Studies Round Table of 27.05.2010; Minutes from European Studies Round Table of 15.03.2011; Minutes from the Faculty Round Table AC/CW 2011;

³ Kluvelde, Pollemans, Schade (1999) "Analyse van de kwaliteit van de taken in het CWS-basiscurriculum"; Wesseling (2002) (Studeerbaarheidsfondsproject)

3. The Empirical Findings of Our Project

This main part of the report presents the empirical findings, grouped around three main aspects: the perception of the idea of PBL, the perceived strengths of PBL, as well as the perceived challenges and suggestions for improvement.

3. A. The Idea(l) of PBL

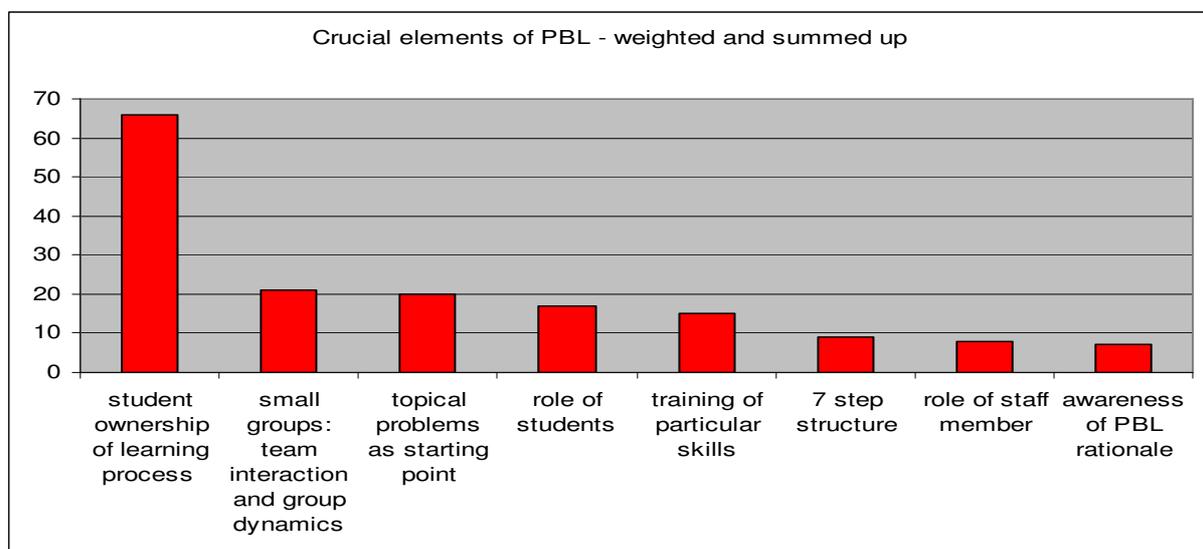
3.A1. What Do We Agree Upon

The aspects that FASoS staff members agree upon are twofold. On the one hand there is consensus about the level of dedication for teaching and a strong support for the general rationale of PBL, while on the other hand there is also agreement that we need an openness and variety in practice that prevents a routine or ritualised use of PBL and allows to take into account the concrete context of the learning and teaching process.

The most pleasant aspect of our work on this project was the dedication and concern for quality of our teaching that we experienced from our colleagues throughout the year.

There is a huge amount of commitment and inspiration for teaching, which makes our faculty a wonderfully pleasant place to work in. Teaching is considered as highly valuable, and even in complementarity to research and often scarce time the strong dedication of staff members makes it a vibrant and living environment. At the same time, this positive attitude and spirit should not be taken for granted but it is something that has to be worked on.

Figure 1: The crucial Elements of Problem-Based Learning



Second, there is general support for the underlying rationale of PBL in terms of defining a university education not as the one-sided transfer of facts and knowledge. Respondents in the questionnaire emphasised in absolute agreement that student ownership is the most crucial element of PBL (see figure 1). The active role of students in their own learning process, their self-responsibility and student ownership are the central element of our small scale teaching at FASoS. The team interaction and group dynamics in the small groups, the role of students within the tutorials and topical problems as starting point were also mentioned, followed by the 7-step structure, the role of staff members, and the awareness of the underlying PBL rationale and the training of particular skills.

Those elements were also repeatedly confirmed in our interviews, where special emphasis was put on the advantage of small scale teaching and the possibility to stimulate students in our PBL environment, while at the same time it was highlighted that the success of the latter is dependent on the group situation and asks for flexibility, especially from the tutor. Also the group size (no more than 15) is considered a crucial element. Generally, all interviewees are pleased with the way tutorials work in general, i.e. they emphasized the added value of this close contact with students in contrast to lecturing in front of a big and passive crowd.

Furthermore, the student-centred nature of PBL is perceived very positively – to let students do, giving staff members the possibility/responsibility to facilitate the research attempts of students; It is an active process that encourages students to talk and interact, and it motivates students if done well; Furthermore, the active role of students being responsible of the organisation of their own meetings in taking over the role as chair enhances student responsibility and the training of leadership skills. At the same time, the learning/teaching approach at FASoS also facilitates the creation of a “knowledge community”, where staff members but later on also peers can serve as role-models whom students can learn from;

Yet, despite this profound agreement about the crucial elements of PBL as used at FASoS, various staff members also emphasized the need for a variety in our PBL practice. PBL is more than just 7 steps and PBL practices are different, which should be openly acknowledged and part of our PBL approach. According to the level of students and their pre-knowledge about the research process, pre-discussions, for example, can and should be structured more flexible and freely. PBL is a learning system that highlights certain useful elements of learning, but it should not be used as THE slogan that addresses all perceived challenges. It should be very clear that also other universities use seminars and working groups, and therefore we should not fall into the trap of considering small-group-teaching as something too special, that is absolutely unique to our University. PBL certainly puts an emphasis on small-scale teaching, and that is a good shift that PBL should be accounted for, but that alone does not make good teaching; It is rather the starting point that can build a sound base for different forms of student-centered and active learning process.

3.A2. Yet, Variety in Practice

Although the 7 steps method is mentioned as an essential idea of PBL, there appears to be a difference of attitudes towards the necessity of following the steps. For some respondents PBL and the steps seem to be inherently linked. They stress the crucial importance of elements such as the prediscussion and brainstorm - and express concern for a growing pressure on the time that is left for them. (The average ratio between Post discussion and Pre discussion seems to be around 75% to 25% - an hour and a half vs. half an hour.) Others have replaced the 7 steps in the course design with a more flexible way of discussing the next assignment, or even with an entirely different learning cycle.

There is a general consensus that a tutor should not turn into a lecturer. But the exact role and responsibility of the tutor in the group meetings is another issue on which respondents do not entirely agree – or seem to be unresolved themselves. To what extent does a tutor have to be an expert on the subject matter that is discussed? Is (s)he responsible for actively providing an overview of the content or even for explaining that content if the group fails to do so?

There also is divergence in the way in which the course literature is assigned. Some courses specifically prescribe the reading for each assignment, while other courses only provide an overall list of titles at the end of the course book.

Several respondents note that it does make sense to build a development into the curriculum structure: as students grow into PBL and gradually advance the skills that are needed to make it succeed, the room for ‘freedom’ and alternative forms of teaching can be increased. Therefore, a variety in practice should not just happen in accordance with the preferences of the coordinator or the course designing team, but the varied application of PBL could follow a clear assessment of how much structure students need in their current level of being in charge of their own learning process.

Broadly, the variety in practice is observable on two levels: on the one hand the set-up of a course can range from a strict PBL as seven-step design with clear assignment texts to a more open design where the rationale of PBL is applied in a more independent manner. On the other hand, varieties in practice also occur in adapting the role of students in the tutorial, by trying different ways of supporting students in their learning process. The following paragraphs outline some variations for both forms.

First, various forms of course design are observable in both BA programmes. Courses in the first year of the BA ES, for example, use a strict PBL as seven-step model, while courses in the second year follow even more strongly the logic of student-ownership, peer-feedback and group work, which gives the students with support of their tutor more independence in structuring their learning process more flexible, also time-wise. This more open structure provides students with the opportunity to take more responsibility and try for themselves what kind of working practice and research process works for them, without being the set structures of the seven steps and tutorials twice a week. This more open form of PBL tutorials provides a good preparation for the individual research processes that students engage in during their BA papers at the end of the second year. In the third year the electives in particular use even more open forms and engage students as young researchers in workshops where they present their research output and writing of blogs. In the AC/CW Media Culture specialization, the cycle of prediscussion/reading/post discussion has been replaced by writing weblog or wiki – entries on the theme of each session and peer reviewing them.

Second, alternatives to the traditional PBL method of going through the 7 steps (usually as a supplement or variation to regular sessions) include: forms of writing other than exam questions or final essays - such as: reports, reviews of books/articles/lectures/movies, weblog entries, wiki's, defense? of statements - feedback through peer review, debates, presentations, symposia. But there are also more varied practices used: More than one tutor tried to stimulate the students' own creative research process in giving them a personal project on which they can work parallel to the 'regular' meetings. Other suggestions were to improve the role and the performance of the chair (discussion leader), because the whole pre-discussion relies more or less on his/her communicative and knowledge qualities. One new practice was to choose *two* chairs per meetings, who have to prepare their function(s) in advance. The tutor distributed a list with the double chairs already at the beginning of the course. Thus the debate culture and the challenge of group dynamics can be dealt with better. Another successfully tested variation was to add to the PBL-structure a small individual assignment that is concentrated in a summary of a theoretical text each meeting. Another idea was to organize "debates" with the texts that means to divide the group according to texts that concentrate a certain "approach/answer" to the problem. Another variation was to integrate 'close readings' in the PBL-structure or to let the students read a text and ask them to find out the 'problem' of the text and its 'answer' to the problem.

Last but not least, it also became very clear that staff members in general consider PBL as integral part of our teaching, i.e. that there is an intrinsic *interconnectedness* of PBL with the organization and content of our teaching. Context matters, and the way of teaching/learning can not really be separated from the content. Hence, while we tried in our project to particularly focus on PBL as a method, it also became clear very quickly that we also have to take into account the context, if we aim for a comprehensive assessment.

3.B. What Goes Well With PBL (Strengths)

Throughout the entire process of the project, our impression has been confirmed that the general attitude towards teaching at FASoS is positive and constructive.

In our talks with students at the Faculty Round Tables and on other occasions, in our extensive interviews with (senior) staff members and in the focus group discussions with junior staff we found a common spirit of enthusiasm and strong dedication for teaching. At the same time, everyone involved also proved to be reflective and critical both on teaching in general and on their own role within the

teaching process. We are convinced that even the criticisms and complaints which we encountered and collected are expressions of the same dedication and of a genuine concern for our teaching quality.

The general appreciation of our teaching is in line with the appreciation of Problem Based Learning at our faculty, as it appears from the questionnaire results. The overwhelming majority of respondents claim to enjoy teaching with PBL, which on a scale from 1 to 10 is on average graded with an 8. Likewise, PBL is perceived as a suitable teaching method for FASoS, scoring only slightly less⁴.

Figure 2: Staff members' appreciation for teaching with PBL at FASoS

<i>To what extent do you enjoy teaching with PBL?</i>		<i>To what extent do you perceive PBL as a suitable teaching method for FASoS</i>	
score	frequency	score	frequency
5	2	5	1
6	2	6	3
7	4	7	11
8	11	8	9
9	9	9	5
10	4	10	3
average	8,09	average	7,72

The following overview of the strengths of the PBL system can be compiled from all the different sources of input (see also table 3):

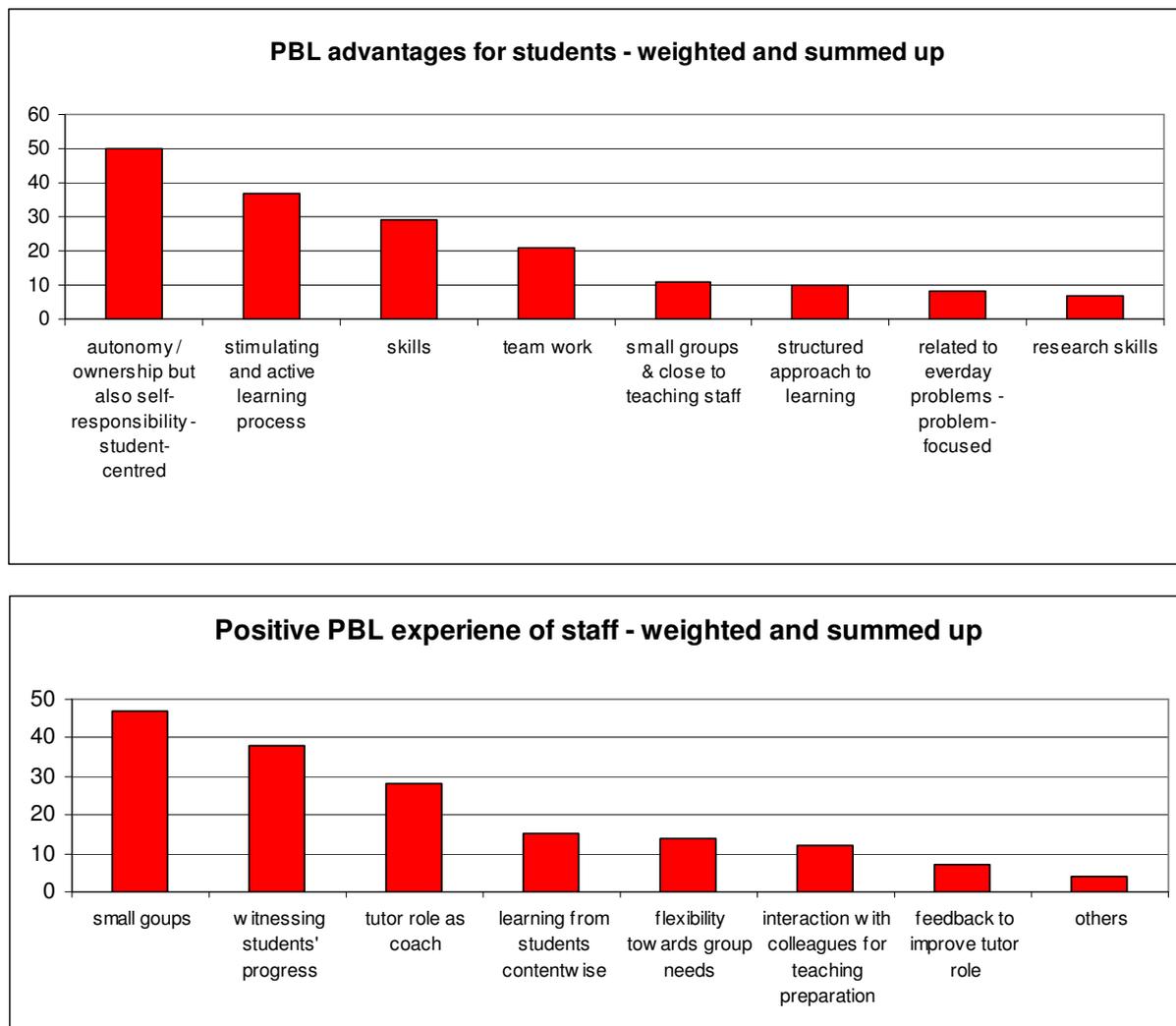
PBL offers the opportunity to balance the needs for guidance and freedom. It provides a structured approach to learning and demands an organized and active attitude from students towards studying. At the same time there is room for flexibility of varying teaching styles within PBL. Its focus on problems allows for the possibility to integrate and address topical themes and issues and there is room to discuss and explain the relevance of the subject material. Having “space for contemporary issues” was highlighted as a very positive feature by staff members, and recent evaluations showed that this link to current events is an important element for students' motivation that supports their eagerness for inquiry but also provides a good motivation in terms of providing relevance for the topic at hand.

Through the teamwork which is central to PBL, a stimulating learning environment can emerge in which activity and interactivity are encouraged and fostered. It can offer the experience of being part of a knowledge community, where knowledge is not ‘given’ and transferred, but ‘constructed’ and shared and where everyone who is involved in the learning process simultaneously contributes to and benefits from it. Teaching staff explicitly mentions the advantage of learning from PBL groups in terms of content. This is also due to the fact that PBL naturally invites to approach a problem or theme from a variety of different angles and (disciplinary) perspectives.

Because PBL is student-centred, it promotes the independence and autonomy of students, giving them ownership of their education and challenging them to take responsibility. PBL is very much skills oriented. Besides (academic) skills such as reading, writing and presenting, PBL is specifically suited to practice and develop the kinds of competencies which are related to group work, such as participating in discussion, debating, chairing, giving and receiving feedback. Moreover, PBL from the very outset endorses the development of crucial research skills: to formulate relevant and feasible questions, to gather, select and analyze information from a variety of sources, to critically reflect on methodology and on conclusions.

⁴ The high score of this numbers was surprising, and we assume that they should not be taken into account without an interpretation: We assume that especially those people responded in our questionnaire that are already positively involved in the reflection on our teaching. Yet, just because those staff members are engaged in teaching should not imply that they are absolutely positive about PBL – quite on the contrary, it might actually be that those respondents reflect a lot on the advantages and disadvantages of PBL, and hence might be even more critical than others. Hence, these numbers do not per se show the general support for PBL, but they surely indicate that those staff members dedicated to teaching are pleased with using PBL as main teaching approach.

Figure 3: Advantages of PBL – for students and staff (weighted and summed up)



This makes PBL especially suitable for the field of social sciences or for the FASoS- field of Arts, Media and Culture. Starting from the common understanding at our faculty that knowledge is always culturally constructed and not neutral, we can here give a specific example for the similarity between PBL and our methodological approach in research: In the AMC-focal point on cultural memory and its intentional and unintentional dynamics, figures and narrations of 'unsolved' conflicts are emphasised as living tokens and places of remembering. On the other hand the PBL approach in teaching also emphasizes 'unsolved' cultural problems that underlie and code cultural processes of memory and amnesia.

The small size of the groups within the PBL system - there is a general consensus that a PBL group ideally consists of around 12 students, with a maximum of 15 - allows for close contact and interaction between students and teachers. This is also appreciated by students, as the following quote from the ES round table (2011) illustrates: *"Students as well as staff appreciate the Problem-Based Learning approach, which characterises studying and teaching at the faculty leading to a special working relationship between students among each other and between students and tutors"*. The possibility for immediate feedback is perceived as an important advantage. Teachers like the possibility to directly intervene and guide the process when necessary. For them, the opportunity to directly experience and witness the progress and development of groups and individual students is particularly gratifying, as it allows staff members to see *"how students bloom"*. In a similar vein, students appreciate this format as it keeps them motivated *"to keep up with the course in terms of learning"* (ES round table 2010).

PBL provides a systematic way to learn the profession of teaching, especially for junior staff members, as nowadays not only a PhD is considered as necessary but also to learn how to teach and facilitate learning processes. PBL helps young staff to find out for themselves what works in a structured and guided way, and it seems a good way for young teachers to enter the teaching process;

Apart from the knowledge in terms of content, tutors also get profound insights in the intrinsic nature of group dynamics: one learns hands on how to deal with different groups, different styles and different dynamics. Furthermore, staff members also appreciate the possibility to work in multidisciplinary teams and to exchange ideas and practices with colleagues.

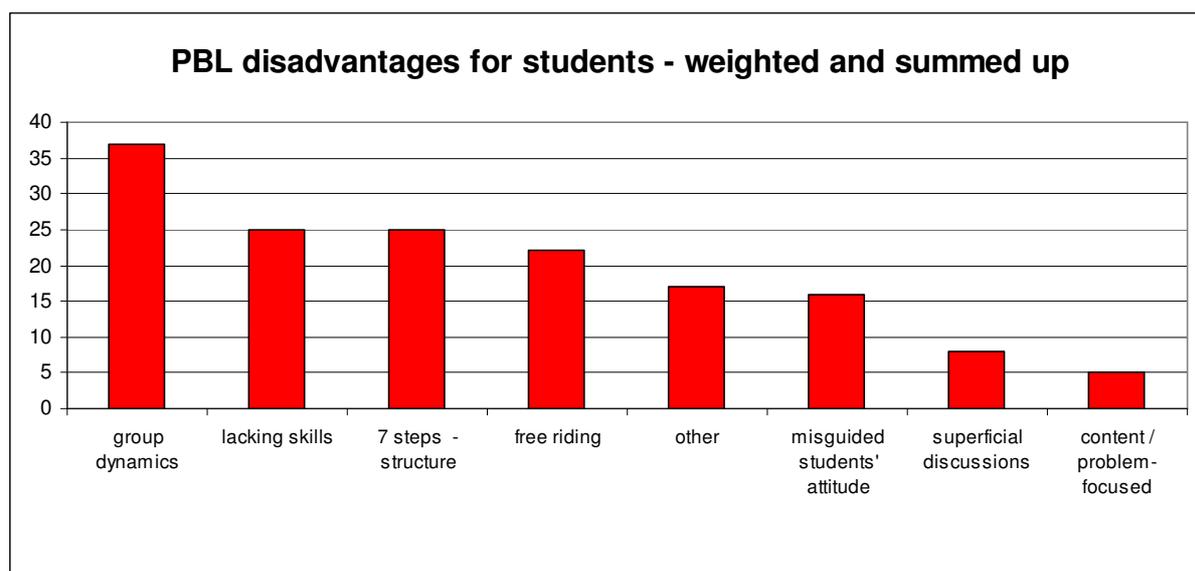
There is a strong agreement about these aspects of strength of the PBL system as used in our faculty. Yet, it was also mentioned by several of the interviewees that the advantages and benefits of Problem Based Learning which have been listed above should never be taken for granted. It would be a mistake to think that the PBL system in itself is what will positively distinguish us or guarantee the quality of our teaching. To realize the potential and promises of PBL, there is a constant need for attention, work and improvement.

The next chapter will discuss the main challenges of learning/teaching within a PBL system as identified by staff members. It is striking in comparison to the strengths as mentioned above that mostly it is the same elements that are also identified as challenges.

3.C. Challenges and Suggestions

Staff members consider group dynamics in tutorials, the varying quality of students' skills to apply PBL in a most fruitful manner, and the 7-step structure as the main challenges for students who learn in a PBL environment (see figure 4). Working in small groups had been identified as one of the strengths of PBL, but staff members also experience that the dependence of students on their group to work has also to be considered one of the main challenges. In this regard it was reported that it should not be automatically assumed that everyone feels comfortable in speaking in front of a group, that shy students are often left behind, and that at the same time “bullshitters” sometimes hijack the discussion.

Figure 4: Challenges of PBL for students (according to staff members)



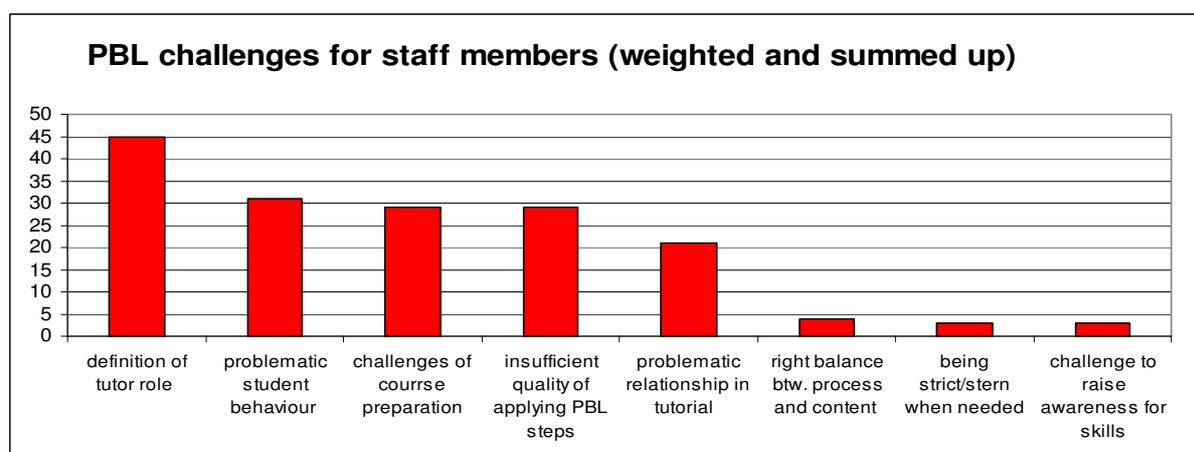
This challenge of being reliant on group dynamics is reinforced by the second challenge of communicative and team skills of students to work in a PBL environment most fruitfully. PBL tutorials are based on a strong communicative aspect, while especially young students are often overwhelmed by making their way of communicating work. Staff members report that their students are often able to report back what they have read, but the ability to listen to each other and actually relate what others have reported should not be taken for granted, but has to be gradually trained. Staff members also report that PBL tutorials do mostly not give guidance in closed reading, and that the assessment of an argument of a specific text/author is not explicitly trained and explained, as students have a tendency to focus on fact-finding in regard of their questions. Staff members experience that students often do not critically allow themselves to follow the line of argumentation of a specific text, but if the argument does not fit to their learning objective, they discard the text/lecture etc as “not relevant” or even “wrong”. Yet, if students repeatedly reduce complex texts to “questions that can be answered” they will never experience situations of “not knowing” (Sokrates) and “amazement” that are the beginning of in depths processes of thinking.

In a similar vein, the importance of students chairing the meeting is a crucial element of the PBL logic, while it is often the quality of the student chairs that staff members consider as hampering the communication processes in the tutorials. Tutors have then to balance the tension between making the post-discussion work, while at the same time they also have to be careful in not taking over the chairmanship or frustrating the student who is chairing. In an ideal PBL setting students would improve their chairing skills over time and learn from their experiences, but this is often difficult to facilitate as a tutor who experiences a student only one time in this role. Furthermore, there is also often not enough time to also provide feedback on this skills dimension.

The third challenge staff members identify is related to the 7-step structure that is meant to structure the PBL tutorials and provide guidance for students (especially more junior ones). If the 7-steps are applied too rigidly and in a way that does not allow for flexibility, staff members and students feel like “*following this routine slavishly*” in a boring manner to tackle the prescribed reading. Staff members also highlight that an 8th step is actually missing that would allow for reflection on the previous pre-discussion and the success of the learning process.

Yet, PBL not only brings certain challenges for students. When asked what main challenges staff members have to deal with when teaching with PBL, the different role as a tutor, problematic student behaviour and challenges in terms of course preparation were mentioned as the main elements (see figure 5). Also the insufficient quality of some PBL-steps and problematic relationships are considered as challenges that staff members have to deal with in a PBL setting.

Figure 5: Challenges of PBL for staff members



Complementing those results with our findings from the interviews, focus groups discussions and round tables, it showed that staff members identify challenges at three different levels. A differentiation of those three levels allows for a more profound and clear assessment: First, structural

challenges concern all staff members to the same extent and influence in a cross-cutting manner; Second, challenges become visible in regard of setting-up and designing a course, when course coordinators and revision teams make certain decisions that have profound impacts on the way PBL works in practice later on. And last, there is of course the practical implementation of PBL in the tutorials, where especially tutors are confronted with specific group-specific challenges.

In a next step, these three categories of challenges are elaborated upon in more detail, while at the end of each subchapter we also indicate various suggestions for overcoming those challenges that had been highlighted by staff members. It should be noted that many of the aspects mentioned below are considered by staff members as challenges that they experience in their every-day teaching and that they consider as important to keep in mind when working with PBL. Yet, this should NOT imply that those challenges are not already tackled or have not been considered at our faculty already beforehand to different degrees. The next chapter should rather be read as an inventory of the kind of challenges PBL encounters when applied in the context of a faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

3.C1. Challenge I: Cross-cutting Structural Challenges

This section discusses the main overall challenges concerning our teaching at FASoS. They are not necessarily unique to Problem-Based Learning, as some of those issues may also occur in other learning environments. However, as staff members perceive them closely linked to our teaching, they of course also impact on our PBL practice. We identified five broader themes that help to categorise those cross-cutting structural challenges: awareness of PBL rationale; continuing and clear communication of the rationale behind the programme structure; creating connection and synergy between teaching and research; presence and visibility of senior staff members in BA programmes, and finally, a scarcity of time for reflection. Concluding, suggestions of staff members of how to tackle those challenges are listed.

3.C1.1 Awareness of PBL Rationale

In regard of the BA ES, it is especially students who suggest that new tutors would need a better and more precise framework and guidance before they start teaching. Staff members report that they often had to start teaching before going through the PBL introductory training. At the same time, students also stress that it is not only staff members, but also students themselves who should get a better idea of the rationale behind PBL and of its positive aspects (e.g. more theory of learning).

Next to this perceived need of getting a better understanding for the rationale behind PBL, there seem to be generally two common misperceptions which lead to attitudes that are counterproductive to the spirit of PBL:

One tendency staff members identified is the misperceived fostering of a positivistic approach to knowledge: students seem to get the impression that there is ONE TRUE ANSWER to the learning objective, and one true answer only; Learning Goals are discussed in the post-discussion to find a consensus, *“but actually we should foster dissent which is needed for debate, instead of consensus á la ‘what is true and relevant for exam’”*. PBL can be susceptible to the false impression by students that problem solving should lead to an objective argumentation and that they have to discover “the one solution”, if this is not counter-balanced by the course set-up or the tutor. As this practice stands in strong opposition to the ideals of academic thinking and research, it is important that staff members are aware of this potential development and that they try to guide the group towards a comprehensive understanding of the debate. From experience, on the other hand staff members also report that *“arguing and disagreeing groups are often the better ones”* but that it is very difficult to transfer this stance to students; This way PBL *“closes and locks in, instead of opening up and allowing critical reflection”*.⁵

The second misperception that staff members report about is that PBL ironically seems to entrench with students a form of “consumerism”: some students increasingly tend to behave as “consumers”

⁵ At the same time, it is not satisfying if group discussions end in ‘aporia’: to be ‘critical’ means to try to distinguish between (and agree upon) fruitful and unhelpful approaches and positions.

and in line with this kind of perception they often think that it is enough for gaining knowledge “*to just sit in a tutorial*”. Interestingly enough this is also something that students themselves were highlighting strongly during the 2010 Round table and in other group interviews – tutors should intervene and work against such tendencies.

The elements of PBL which seem to meet the most scepticism seem to be the prediscussion and particularly the brainstorm. If the rationale of those steps is not clear and if their value is not convincingly demonstrated in practice, they are in danger of being perceived as “useless”, “unpleasant” and “a waste of time”.

3.C1.2. Continuous Communication of the Rationale behind the Programme Structure

It is not easy to keep an overview of the curricula of the various programmes, especially with the constant revisions and changes. Students claim that staff members do not always seem to have an overview of the curriculum and are not aware of what students have already covered in previous courses and are still going to cover in future ones. This becomes particularly problematic when repetitions appear within the curriculum, which are clearly not intended. (While repetition as such can be productive, it should always be consciously planned and accounted for.)

For the BA AC/CW, many respondents indicated that they would welcome a more integrative dialogue and exchange of ideas on the structure and identity of the programme. That way, the role of individual courses within the curriculum structure could be made clearer and the connections between those courses could be strengthened and improved. Especially the integration of the skills training modules within the overall programme could benefit from a dialogue on their rationale within the overall programme, their weight in terms of ECTS and their link to the parallel courses.

While the need for a more general dialogue was less expressed in the BA ES, attention should be paid, of course, to identify the positive processes and mechanisms that seem to foster efficient communication in this programme, in order to guide the cooperation of staff members in the BA ES also in the future (like the biweekly ES meetings where the minutes are sent to all staff teaching in the programme in case they could not join; the just recently implemented ES coordinator Eleum page etc). Also the newly published course catalogues that provide a precise overview about the programme structure are a good step in informing (new) staff members about changes and adaptations.

3.C1.3. Creating Synergy between Teaching and Research

Teaching and Research are integral but often also conflicting tasks. Staff members experience a two-fold tension between those two: on the one hand the academic community presses increasingly for publications to measure the research output, which often conflicts with the time that is needed for teaching (preparation); on the other hand, linking research to the content and set-up of teaching proves often challenging. PBL in many aspects mimics research, yet it is perceived of a challenge by staff members to communicate one’s own research to students. While there is a certain challenge of having to present the research results to a different kind of audience (students not peer researchers), there is also the organisational challenge that course books have to be often fixed in advance and do not allow for a flexible and ad-hoc integration of additional topics. In addition, it is often students who seem to struggle to see the relevance of those academic debates for their education.

3.C1.4. Presence and Visibility of Senior Staff in the BA Programmes

Senior members of staff seem to increasingly withdraw from the BA programmes, especially from the first year. While there is a certain rationale that experienced researchers share their knowledge with more senior students who have already reached a certain level of academic understanding, it is reported by staff as well as students that they would appreciate a stronger mix of staff also already in the first courses of the bachelor programmes. This way the interaction between more junior staff members who are just starting their teaching career and experienced staff members could be guaranteed and allow for a fruitful interaction.

3.C1.5. Scarcity of Time for Reflection

Time is scarce – there is not enough time for reflection, not enough time for pre-discussion, not enough time for failing; and everything has to happen quickly, before we rush on to the next topic/task/course.

That seems to be the general assessment of staff and students alike. Our programmes are dense in terms of content but also in terms of scheduling, and there is hardly any possibility to take a step back and reflect. While the first impression is that it is mainly a problem of designing, structuring and implementing teaching (i.e. we do not have enough time often to talk with students about their learning process because there is so much content to cover – see challenges 3.C2 from p. 15 onwards) it soon became clear that this scarcity of time does not only impact on teaching and learning itself, but that it also puts a more general pressure on staff members that cross-cuts many of the other challenges mentioned above and finally leads to a impression that there is not enough time to debate about what it means to be a university.

Especially two elements in terms of scarcity of time were reported by staff members. First, it always seems to be about time for post-discussion vs. time for pre-discussion. When having to decide between the latter it was interesting to hear that most interviewees said that for them the post-discussion is more important and that a small-scale pre-discussion would be sufficient; At the same time, staff members also emphasised that they consider the pre-discussion as an important element, and that they would prefer to have more time for it. Secondly, the learning process of students according to the PBL-7-steps also generally ends after the post-discussion and after the learning objectives have been answered, but rarely there is a going back and a reflection on the originally formulated questions; “*They unreflectively answer questions that they formulated when they were still ‘ignorant’*” was one assessment that brings it to the point; However, the challenge of PBL in this regard is that it assumes that students just by themselves know already how to formulate “good questions” and how to define an interesting and worthwhile focus; In contrast experience shows that often questions are “*repetitive, superficial and lead to easy conclusions*”. While tutors would often like to intervene here and reflect with students on their learning process to help them to plan their learning process “better” the following time, there is often not enough time to do so.

Staff members, additionally, experience this scarcity of time for reflection not only in their interaction with students, but also in their interaction with each other. There are always more important tasks to do, more pressing issues to deal with, so that the possibility for feedback to each other and exchange of experience has often to be neglected. In combination with the perceived ‘verscholing’ some staff members emphasised that they would welcome a more open and engaging debate among our faculty staff about what kind of university FASoS aims to be in the future.

Suggestions from staff members of how to tackle structural challenges

- Offer PBL training for students; focus more on PBL skills in first two courses in first year;
- Offer more comprehensive training for (new) staff members;
- PBL evaluation for whole cohort at the end of the first year;
- Ensure efficient communication with coordinators and provide curriculum overview;
- Teaching performance and staff evaluation should figure transparently in career prospects;
- More mix of junior and senior staff in teaching, plus exchange of teaching experience;
- Provide more “space” for reflection and more “time” for things to go wrong, e.g. to experience ‘bad’ questions;
- Less administration more time for teaching/research – more delegation of organisational tasks to free time for teaching preparation
- More electives in order to down-size number of students per course

3.C2. Challenge II: Substance of Teaching in Designing & Developing a Course

It is not just the tutors in the tutorials who have to adapt to their different role in a PBL environment, but when a course is designed or revised, it is the course coordinators and/or the revision team who have to strongly take into account that the course allows to be dealt with in the manner of PBL. The set-up of the course and especially the design of particular assignments both impact to a large extent on the successful use of PBL.⁶

Staff members identified various challenging aspects at this level of course design and set-up that we grouped according to five broader themes: integration of skills development into course design; balancing content and skills; balancing freedom and consistency; avoiding routine and automatism; writing of assignment and finding right (kind) of materials; as well as finding a meaningful way of examination;

3.C2.1. Integrating Skills Development into Course Design

PBL assumes certain skills to be present, as without a certain level of communication skills, group working skills, self-responsibility etc PBL would not work. There is a strong reliance on self-study and self-responsibility of students, and students should be able to use this stage efficiently, report in a coherent manner verbally, and be able to compare and contrast their results in discussing with each other. PBL asks for student-responsibility and the active participation of students: they should define what they are interested in, what puzzles them about a certain problem; But this also implies that it is important to stimulate and help students to formulate their own learning questions; Linked to that staff members are required to support students in developing practical skills such as discussion, debate, chairing and evaluation. Yet, at the same time, PBL is said to train especially those skills.

The varying quality of students' skills already present to deal with those requirements was identified as one of the main challenges. The course coordinator has to find the right balance between establishing the prerequisites to fulfil the course tasks and providing time/tasks for training new skills. An insufficient integration of this skills-component might lead to courses being perceived as too easy (students are bored), or as too difficult (discourages them).

3.C2.2. Balancing Content and Skills

PBL not only focuses on the content of the course but it is very much skills orientated. This is generally considered as a positive advantage, but at the same time it is often criticised that this way no stable stock of knowledge is acquired anymore – at least not in the traditional fashion that academic staff defines the relevant basic knowledge that students should have gained after a course. It is not about remembering anymore, but everything is about how you gain what kind of knowledge, which you need to solve the problem.

There seems no consensus that it should be totally up to students to assess what kind of background knowledge they have to acquire to solve certain problems – staff members agree that it is not about traditional knowledge acquisition, but nevertheless staff members should pre-define what students have to learn in terms of content to be able to answer the question.

Staff members assess that students often do not sufficiently acquire “*background and disciplinary knowledge and methodological skills*”. It was explained as a central challenge how to convey sound “*disciplinary background knowledge*” within the student-centred method of PBL. There is a tension between PBL focused student discussion and the acquiring of contextual knowledge that cannot be solved only in the lectures. In a similar vein, students report that they do not always understand the link between the main courses and the skills training. Furthermore, the lectures, which should provide this ‘background knowledge’ are often perceived by students as not fitting to their overall debates in the tutorials and they struggle to see the relevance of the topics discussed in some of the lectures for their tutorial meetings.

⁶ In the PBL literature, the design of assignments is considered as the most crucial issue next to the role of the tutor to make PBL successful.

Interviewees emphasized that both tracks should figure highly in our teaching and learning process: content and process development are equally important – and none of the two aspects can be the sole focus of our learning; At the same time, the aspect of the learning process is often neglected or pushed off the agenda, if there is too little time because of the need to cover too much content in one meeting.

Another element related to these reflections is that PBL as we apply it at FASoS pushes the focus of learning in certain directions but ignores other aspects: the focus is primarily on “question – answer” but sometimes the focus should also just be on the text and its arguments, as staff members point out; It is quite difficult to train students in a PBL setting to ask the “right questions”, as according to the rationale of PBL it is the students who define what an interesting question is for them and what they want to find out; In this regard, providing feedback to students on the way they formulate and come up with their learning objectives, is an aspect of their learning process. Yet, from a reversed perspective students also ask for a clearer justification of why (a specific variation of) PBL is used for a respective course.

3.C2.3. Balancing Freedom and Consistency

Does a PBL application always have to follow the 7-step approach? While there seems to be general agreement that PBL should allow for flexible handling, the boundaries of such flexibility are up for debate among staff members. Students repeatedly emphasised that they would like to have more explanation why 7-steps are used as a specific form of PBL in a course, or why a more varied form is applied in another course.

The challenge identified here is to consider to what extent various topics are suitable for PBL learning, to the extent that PBL always starts from a puzzle or a problem in the ideal case, or as students formulated: “why do some courses work better with PBL than others?”

In terms of designing a puzzle two additional elements were highlighted as challenges by staff and students: the need to find the right balance between freedom and consistency across tutorial groups, and the idea of linking the question at hand to current events and news. In the ideal case, students define in their tutorials what they want to know about a specific topic – what they find interesting and worth researching. Yet, with the rise of numbers of groups running in parallel, this freedom of going in different directions seems often artificial and restricted: on the one hand, all students should engage with the same literature, as otherwise the provided required literature does not cover their specific learning objectives; on the other hand, students are reluctant to allow for a too strong variation of learning objectives in comparison to other groups, as they fear to loose out for the exam. Hence, assignments are challenged with the difficulty to find the right balance between allowing students to pursue their own interests, while still providing clear directions which prevent unwanted divergence between different tutorial groups.

3.C2.4. Avoiding Routine and Automatism

Slightly linked to this phenomenon is the observation of the creation of an “automaticism” – after applying the 7-steps again and again, the process becomes often mechanical and automatic for students; In the pre-discussion students just want to find the “correct” learning objectives as quickly as possible, and they rather de-construct the assignment than trying to understand the problem behind the assignment and be driven by their own curiosity.

These challenges of consumerism and ‘verscholing’ also show in the increasing criticism of students that lectures in courses are often considered as not necessary or irrelevant. While it is indeed a challenge to combine lectures with PBL tutorials in a complementary manner, there also seems to be a more profound disagreement of the role of lectures between students and course designers.

3.C2.5. Creating Assignment & Finding Right (Kind) of Material

While assignment texts play a pivotal role in PBL, it takes a clear curriculum overview, knowledge and experience with student performance and skills, to write them in such a way that they stimulate an engaging and interesting student discussion. Students therefore sometimes just start deconstructing the assignment text where staff members have “hidden” certain questions, instead of dealing with the topic at hand in a self-motivated and creative manner. Additionally, assignment texts in some courses

follow always the same style (text-assignments, describing in each paragraph one specific research question) and there is little variation, which can become repetitive and boring in an eight-week course.

Especially students repeatedly emphasise that they would appreciate if specific assignments and topics would be more strongly linked to current events and social/political problems. Discussing a problem in light of current events helps students to grasp the relevance of the topic and be able to better relate to the aspects discussed. Yet, students perceive it as a challenge that sometimes many fixed learning goals are pre-set for the tutorials, which do not allow for the additional discussion of topical problems.

In terms of study materials, we might think about broadening the palette, which is often limited to academic articles, and allowing for more diversity to also train students in e-literacy and in judging the usefulness and reliability of sources, not just academic ones.

3.C2.6. Finding Meaningful Ways of Examination

Another challenge in terms of course design is the need to have an exam at the end, in contrast to the rather idealistic notion of PBL that students would learn because they are intrinsically motivated and see the relevance themselves anyway. The challenge here is to design a course and materials in a way that catches the attention and curiosity of students, and therefore puts the idea of having to pass an exam in the end in the background.

Challenges raised here refer to the kinds of exams and the kinds of questions that are asked in them (facts versus ‘cases’), as well as whether it is more accurate to assess teamwork or individual performance. In this regard a second FASoS project group worked on “Assessment matters: Towards an inventory of testing methods at FASoS”.

Suggestions from staff members of how to tackle challenges of course set-up

- Learn about alternative ways of PBL from colleagues
- Education on various PBL formats, and various forms of assignments (e.g. research tasks)
- Take PBL and students more seriously – no specification of readings
- Extra-lectures: more frequency of lectures to provide background to have more time for discussion in tutorials
- More space for evaluation during course (e.g. via EleuM)
- Incorporate list of tacit skills into curriculum
- “get students to read”: experienced tutors should guide them through text; more closed reading parts; use more literature exams;
- Make PBL more open to “doing research” instead of following steps
- Allow for more flexible and varied implementation of PBL, especially in 8-weeks-course
- Revise assignments – they should be written for 7-step-approach; more variation in types of assignments; also implies: more training on how to write different types of assignments; e.g. too few discussion assignments so far;

3.C3. Challenge III: Teaching with PBL - Practical Challenges in Tutorials

The challenges discussed so far deal mainly with the design of courses and structural restrictions. Both categories have a strong impact on how tutorials work and to what extent PBL becomes a suitable way of learning and teaching. At the same time, staff members in the specific role of tutors as well as students also identify specific challenges that occur directly in the tutorials when PBL is implemented.

3.C3.1. Inconsistency in Applying PBL – Allowing for Flexibility between Groups

Once a course is set-up the challenge for all involved parties is to allow for flexibility in regard of the needs and interests of the tutorial group, while at the same time achieving overall consistency in terms of the course objectives and factual knowledge to be covered. Students and staff members agree strongly on one aspect: once a course is set-up to follow a specific way of PBL, this should be implemented consistently across all groups. This does not imply that tutors have to become more

similar or that there is one best way to support a group as a tutor, but it was identified as an important aspect for PBL to work that students and tutors alike follow the approach applied in a consistent manner.

3.C3.2. Dealing with Group Dynamics

While the working in small groups and the close interaction between students and between students and tutor are considered as a strength of PBL, group dynamics are also identified as a major challenge by staff members as well as students⁷.

The interaction of students within a group determines the quality of the tutorials. While the challenge of motivating students, supporting their role as chairs and facilitating the integration of shy students is considered as an aspect that tutors have to be aware of, this element seems to be perceived as easier to be tackled than how to deal with students that intentionally decide not to contribute to the tutorials. How to deal with free riders and “cheaters” is a specific challenge that students and staff members seem to struggle with.

Staff members, furthermore, repeatedly stress the challenge of raising students’ awareness and willingness to apply the 7-steps without rushing through them. Often it is not sufficient to just explain what PBL is about to students in very general terms, but they have to recognize and realize for themselves what the underlying logic of this process is.

And as already mentioned above, staff members also emphasise the challenge of linking the pre-and post-discussion on the one hand, and not having enough time and energy left for the pre-discussion.

An interesting aspect that was highlighted in relation to flexibility was the idea that staff members generally should behave as “role models” for students, meaning that “*we have to embody/represent this way of learning*” ourselves in our daily interaction with each other but also with students. “*Tutors should also transfer morals and style of the discipline. It is about attitude*”.

Suggestions from staff members of how to tackle challenges of PBL implementation

- Tutors should show to students why PBL is important (and the seven steps) and discuss it critically;
- Increase awareness for importance of pre-discussion;
- Include student-to-student feedback as additional step in PBL; students need to learn to give constructive feedback to each other; tutors should encourage this process;
- More attention to PBL skills during courses
- More experienced and subject-specifically trained staff as tutors
- Reduction of teaching load; More normuren for first-time teaching of a module
- Tutors should give more feedback on students’ performance – more input of tutor to regulate group dynamics;
- Try to motivate tutors to stick to the system – strict application of PBL sessions – no pick and choose of personal preferences; PBL should be used more consistently, in all courses by all tutors; Yet also: PBL should not be applied dogmatically – tutors should share their knowledge and experience with students
- Use Eleum more strongly to allow communication with tutors and students after tutorial (or use other electronic tools);
- More contact hours per week for students (e.g. 12)
- Involve tutors more as role models as researchers – what are you reading, how etc

⁷ The trajectory of the Basiskwalificatie Onderwijs (BKO) that was established at our faculty in order to improve teaching profiles focused strongly on this challenge for staff members to switch from the role of lecturer to the role of facilitator in a PBL environment. The workshops within this trajectory were highly appreciated by staff members and considerably contributed to the reflection and exchange of good practices on the role of tutors.

4. What These Results Tell Us

The results presented in part 3 of this report have been the structured and categorised accounts of how FASoS staff members perceive and experience PBL in their everyday work. In this part 4 we reflect on the gained empirical material by adding our own analysis and interpretation. This is done in two steps:

First, Ulrike presents her view as a “newcomer” to our faculty and her reflections especially in regard of the BA AC/CW.

Secondly, we identified five pairs of tensions that we discovered underlying our debates about how to apply and also reinvigorate PBL in our teaching efforts. By making those tensions explicit we want to raise awareness and put them up for debate rather than provide ready-made solutions, which in our opinion are not possible to draw without taking into account the context.

4.A. *Ulrike Brunotte: A Fresh View from a Newcomer*

My overall positive impressions of the PBL- method have been included in the other parts of our report. As a devoted teacher I am enthusiastic about the goal of PBL. In comparison with my teaching experiences at different German, Austrian and North American Universities, where, besides lectures and seminars, also work in small groups is a part of the programs, the most striking positive ‘first’ impression with PBL was the active role of the students as chairs of the sessions. At other universities as a professor you are often confronted with a more or less consumerist attitude of students (in large seminars more than in small groups or master classes), the PBL-didactic foster the creativity of the students and even prepare many of them to do their own research.

However many of my own positive experiences are part of our common report and I don’t want to repeat, what we wrote together. However there is also much overlapping with the general part on challenges. Nevertheless, because of the goal of our PLB-report I will concentrate here on the challenges, paradoxes and problems. After every section I put several, mostly practical suggestions for improvement. As my central part of the report were interviews with senior staff members, student groups and tutors, and because I also sat in on classes of my tutors and heard lectures from colleagues, here, I connect the results of these activities with my own experiences. On the whole I was surprised that during most of my in-depths-interviews also more general issues were emphasised. Thus many interviewees of the BA AC/CW concentrated their criticism and their suggestions of improvement on structural issues of the BA program and on communicative challenges.

4.A1. **Communication - Coherence & Program ‘Plot’ (BA AC/CW)**

According to staff members, the central challenge not only for PBL is the problem of communication: Between coordinators and between coordinators and tutors. Furthermore not only students but also staff members complain that “the curriculum is fragmented. The courses are like ‘islands’”. One general output of my interviews was that these two issues are interconnected. Students for example struggle to get an overview and to understand the chronology of the courses; they also often claim that tutors do not always have the information concerning the curriculum. Especially the connection of the skills trainings to the parallel courses doesn’t seem to be clear for them. In addition, many interviewees complain about the inflexibility of many course books, even if there has to be a certain structural difference between the more homogenized first phase of the BA-AC/WC and the more flexible specialization phase.

As I could inform myself in reading course manuals and in studying the course catalogue there is indeed a ‘plot’ and rationale in the BA program of AC/CW. One result of the obvious gap between the objective reality of coherence and the frequently emphasised impression of fragmentation is: the central challenge isn’t the content or chronology of the BA- AC/CW, but the issue of communication.

For the BA AC/CW, many staff members and tutors indicated that they would welcome a more integrative dialogue and exchange of ideas on the structure and identity of the programme. That way, the role of individual courses within the curriculum structure could be made clearer and the connections between those courses could be strengthened and improved. Especially the integration of the skills training modules within the overall programme could benefit from a dialogue on their rationale within the overall programme and especially their link to the parallel courses.

An improvement of communication could also avoid overlapping and even repetitions between and in the different courses and could foster creative cooperation.

Suggestions for improvement

1. Small conference on the BA program and repeated curriculum meetings

At a conference on the BA- program of AC/CW in spring 2012, that will be organized by the director of education, we should discuss the interconnectedness of the courses, skills trainings etc. After that initial conference we should think about the following innovations: At the beginning of every academic year, or at the end of each learning period there should be organized well-prepared meetings of coordinators, responsible authors of the course books and interested tutors. Before that meeting everyone should have read all course manuals for this period. During the meeting, each coordinator presents his/her course and also his/her ideas how this course is connected to the other parallel courses and the skills trainings. Thus the responsible scholars have to find out and recognize old and new interconnections of their courses. The same well-prepared meetings can be organized with coordinators of different learning periods/stages/levels to discuss whether there is a common theme and the “red line” of coherent sequences of the courses and modules or not, and how we can improve the communication about the “red line” of the BA-AC/CW to the students.

2. New Course book format and renewal of the course books and skills trainings

To introduce students better to the coherence of the BA programme and to the special role the course plays in it, a suggestion of improvement is that in every course book, this has to be explained: “Dear student, you are now in course...B. This course follows...A and bridges to course C... “ Besides this, many of the course books need to be renewed, as students and tutors stated. To integrate the suggestions of the student evaluations better in this renewal we should think about periodic group evaluations of the course during the last tutorial meeting and to open a discussion board on Eleum for the course already during the teaching period.

3. Oral introduction to the position of the course within the program

To help students to find their way through the curriculum, we should come back to the helpful traditional practice of explaining the special position of the course within the program during the first tutorial meeting.

4. Insert an introductory skills training in PBL, close reading and research methods at the beginning of the first year (the director of education has already planned this, it begins Sept. 2011)

5. Follow the idea of student portfolio for a better orientation

4.A2. Gap between Teaching and Research

Inflexibility and Paradox between the Goals of PBL and the Teaching Practice

The second central point of criticism of many interviewees, which was also the central topic in a capgroup meeting of L/C was directly connected to the inflexible and fixed status of many course books: Coming from a university tradition, that at least tries to maintain the old “Humboldt-ideal” of the “Einheit von Forschung und Lehre”, for me, a more general question is at stake here: What kind of an idea of a university do we have: What kind of “Bildungsideal” or rationale lies behind our practice? Here the Bologna process shows consequences for the organization of teaching and we have to be aware of our responsibility to connect our “ideals” with the constraints of the new structure.

The problem of pairing research and education causes a real paradox between the claims and the ideals of PBL and the reality of BA teaching at AC/CW: On the one hand, the ideal of PBL is that it should

inspire students to do their own research..., to find their own learning goals, to be creative...On the other hand, the teaching reality is more or less inflexible because of already fixed block books, often repeated tutorials, prescribed readings and PBL practice as routine and ritual...Furthermore, there “ is a lot of academic debate, (and debate during my interviews and in the PBL-group, too), as to whether PBL needs tutors with expertise knowledge in subject matter, or if it is sufficient if the tutor knows the ins and outs of facilitation”⁸.

After 30 years of teaching experience in different European countries and the US, my conviction is, that it is most inspiring for students to engage in their own research at a university level if they can watch a tutor who is inspired in the process of doing research. Furthermore, ongoing research by Eagle, Harsym and Mandin (1992)⁹ has acknowledged that “students guided by content-expert tutors produced more than twice as many learning issues for self-directed learning and spend almost twice the amount of time on self-study. Schmidt, Van der Arend and Mouist (1993)¹⁰ found similar effects of subject-matter expertise on achievement [of students].” (Maurer/Neuhold 2011)

However, because of the inflexible organisation of teaching, and the growing number of tutorial groups, more and more non-matter-expert-tutors, who are only teaching and not doing research, are involved in the BA programme and nearly no senior staff member are still involved as tutors in BA AC/CW programme...Therefore, there is a big gap between the ongoing development of research and the more or less repetitive school-like education. On the other hand, new colleagues with a lot of specialized knowledge and (teaching) skills have hardly any chance to using their creativity to develop – in dialogue with the senior staff of AC/CW – their own courses. As a result enormous knowledge and skills resources are wasted and not used for the education. On the other hand during the interviews I learnt a lot about the creativity of staff members in implementing variations of PBL and even in integrating parts of skills trainings as close reading, small conferences or summaries of theoretical texts in their courses.

On the whole, we should implement and make use of the ideals of PBL for the tutors as well, because the same applies for tutors as for students: They learn and teach best when they set their own research goals. Better subject-matter-expertise in the subject matter can also work as a didactical skill for supervising the group dynamics and to improve the “self-directed learning skills” (Gijsselaers 1996:13)¹¹ of the group.

Furthermore we could also profit a lot from PBL in and for our research. We should be more aware what kind of role PBL could play for our research and how it is, for example, interconnected with our special approach to culture and memory: Starting from the common agreement of our faculty that knowledge is always culturally constructed and not neutral, I can here give a specific example for the similarity between PBL and our methodological approach in research: In the AMC-focal point on cultural memory and its intentional and unintentional dynamics, figures and narrations of ‘unsolved’ conflicts are emphasised as living tokens and places of remembering. On the other hand the PBL approach in teaching also emphasizes ‘unsolved’ cultural conflicts and problems, that underlie and code cultural processes of memory and amnesia.

Suggestions for improvement

1. Learn more from the innovative Marble program in the general BA
2. Implement more research in teaching (also from our PhD-candidates)

⁸ Maurer, Heidi & Neuhold, Christine (2011 forthcoming): Problem-Based Learning in European Studies. In Baroncelli, Stefania, Horga, Ioan and Sophie Vanhoonacker. Teaching European Union Studies: Patterns in Traditional and Innovative Teaching Methods and Curricula. Springer.

⁹ Eagle, Ch. J. Harasym, P.M. & Mandin H. (1992): Effects of TRutors with Case Expertise on Problem-based Learning Issues, In: *Academic Medicine* 67 (7), pp. 465-469.

¹⁰ Schmidt, H.G.; Van der Arend, A., Moust, J.H. Kokx, I. & Boon, L. (1993): Influence of tutors’ subject-matter expertise on student effort and achievement in problem-based learning. *Academic Medicine* 68 (10), 784-791.

¹¹ Gijsselaers, W.H. (1996): Connecting Problem-Based Practices with Educational Theory. In Wilkerson, L. & Gijsselaers, W.H. (eds.): *Bringing Problem-Based Learning to Higher Education: Theory and Practice*, (3-12).

3. Implement more senior staff members also as tutors in the BA programme again
4. Open certain ‘problems’ in the blockbooks, be more flexible
5. Experiment with other didactic ideas/and methods
6. Search for ways to involve Alumni in the BA
7. We have to change and improve the direct input of ongoing research into the Bachelor courses. It would be helpful to establish an active link and a communicative relation between the authors of the course manuals, who are often senior staff members, and the coordinators, to come back to an active implementation of topical research literature in the course books. Furthermore, the coordinators need more freedom to connect the course books more with their current research questions and insights and recombine them with topical issues’ which trigger the students’ curiosity. Most of the interviewees agreed with the suggestion, made by the director of education, to open one “problem” in every course book for the new coordinator to experiment with.
7. Another suggestion, already approved by the L/C capgroup, was to “reorganize the specialization phase of the bachelor curricula by designing flexible courses that go under very broad and general denominations (‘Capita selecta from’). This would help staff members to rotate, presenting students with their latest insights, while it would give new colleagues the chance to participate in course development.”¹²
8. More Flexibility could also be promoted by introducing a greater variety of pedagogical formats. At the moment, we basically have two formats (lectures and tutorial group sessions). Here, again, the frequency and size of these formats have been defined quite rigidly. Why not also introduce more and other formats of varying size and frequency, such as ‘seminars’, hosting 25-30 students (and do small-group work during the sessions), and meeting 4 times in an eight-week course?”¹³
9. Some staff members successfully integrate different didactic and methodological approaches such as: close readings, summaries of theoretical texts, short oral presentations of their own research, or a two- students-chairing model for each meeting. More than one tutor tried to stimulate the students’ own creative research process in giving them a personal project on which they can work parallel to the ‘regular’ meetings. Other suggestions were to improve the role and the performance of the chair (discussion leader), because the whole pre-discussion relies more or less on his/her communicative and knowledge qualities. One new practice was to choose *two* chairs per meetings, who have to prepare their function(s) in advance. The tutor distributed a list with the double chairs already at the beginning of the course. Thus the debate culture and the challenge of group dynamics can be dealt with better. Another successfully tested variation was to add to the PBL-structure a small individual assignment that is concentrated in a summary of a theoretical text each meeting. Another idea was to organize “debates” with the texts that means to divide the group according to texts that concentrate a certain “approach/answer” to the problem. Another variation was to integrate ‘close readings’ in the PBL-structure or to let the students read a text and ask them to find out the ‘problem’ of the text and its ‘answer’ to the problem.

4.A3. Connection between Acquisition of Knowledge and PBL Didactics

Another topic of many interviews was the complaint that students lack “background and disciplinary knowledge and methodological skills”. It was explained especially by senior staff members who do a lot of research as a central structural challenge how to impart sound “disciplinary background knowledge” within the student- centred method of PBL.

There is an imbalance between PBL focused student discussion and the implementation of contextual knowledge, that cannot be done only in the lectures. Students often stated, that skills trainings were often not directly connected to the parallel courses and sometimes even “compete with them”.

¹² Capgroup A/C ,letter’ to Rein de Wilde/ minutes November 2010.

¹³ See above.

Furthermore, the lectures, which should give this ‘background knowledge’ were very often not organized enough and do not have a connecting structure or red line.

Suggestions for improvement

An improvement could be to integrate elaborated skills training more in the courses and, intersect the PBL-seven steps with close reading, summaries of theoretical texts, etc. as many tutors and coordinators already do.

Another suggestion would be to improve the communication and interdisciplinary teamwork between the parallel skills trainings and the courses. Insert an introductory skills training in PBL, close reading, and research methods at the beginning of the first year. (The director of education is already working on that, see above)

4.A4. Hierarchy between Research and Teaching

Certain criticism also came up in some interviews with staff members. This concerns the hour system (solver) for teaching. Some devoted teachers, who are very popular with the students, stated, that, “the hours you get as a tutor for preparation of a course, a lecture, and for coordination are not enough”, and that they, if they spend more hours for the courses, lectures and student contact they get problems with their tasks as a researcher.

Suggestions for improvement

Unfortunately we cannot change the number of hours we get for teaching and therefore we have to discuss how to deal with our time more efficiently and productive.

4.B. Tensions in our PBL Practice: Reconciling Opposing Demands?

To structure the discussion on PBL and the quality of our teaching it may be helpful to look for basic tensions (or paradoxes) which underlie the raised issues, especially as both the strengths and the challenges identified point to the same elements of our teaching. Formulating such tensions can contribute to a productive debate in two ways:

By identifying the goals and demands which seemingly oppose or contradict each other, the issues which require deliberation will become more explicit.

Moreover, we can ask for each set of opposing demands whether they are necessarily and inevitably clashing. Maybe there are ways to address, balance or even resolve them in the practical context of our teaching. At the same time, we do not think that there is ONE way of solving these tensions. What we aim to do here, is to outline and raise awareness for these tensions, to allow staff members to make a deliberate choice. We identified the following five pairs of tensions.

4.B1. Research AND Teaching

Teaching and research are competing in an obvious way: the time and resources which are spent on the one cannot be spent on the other. Clear and inevitable choices need to be made here. If we agree that teaching is important and if we have the ambition to distinguish ourselves on teaching, then it will need to be valued, appreciated and cared for accordingly.

However, it would be counterproductive to exclusively frame the debate in terms of a ‘zero-sum game’. Our efforts should concentrate on bringing together research and teaching in such a way that they can really benefit from each other. We need to explore and develop meaningful connections and synergies which enrich both of them at the same time.

4.B2. Flexibility AND Consistency (application PBL, assessment, procedures)

We cherish the variety within PBL practices, and wish to maintain (or even increase) the freedom to shape it as we see fit. At the same time, there is an increasing demand for clarity, consistency, transparency and predictability. Students, for example, want to know exactly what to expect and how they will be assessed. Managing the growth of the Faculty also requires standardization of procedures.

4.B3. Variation AND Coherence (content, design)

We advocate freedom and openness towards the content of our teaching programs. Staff should have more opportunity to bring in their research expertise, to be able to adapt and respond to intriguing and topical problems. We want students to have a degree of ‘ownership’ of the subject matters and questions to be discussed, to find their own way and choose their path. But we also ask for a more coherent program structure and a clearer identity.

4.B4. Content AND Process

We want our students to acquire a substantive, stable stock of knowledge. At the same time, PBL requires the practice and development of skills (team work, charring, reading and reporting etc.) and even puts the main emphasis on the development of students towards independent researchers.

This seems to reflect the well known “hen-egg problem” – PBL needs certain skills to be present to function well, at the same time PBL trains these skills when applied. Yet, when a tutorial group is unable to cover the content of a course sufficiently due to an insufficient quality of skills present, this often creates time pressure, and most of the time staff members react to this deficiency with a

tendency to ‘repair’ the substance, instead of trying to improve and develop the skills and learning process of the group, e.g. towards a more fruitful prediscussion, better chairing etc.

4.B5. Efficiency AND Contemplation

We feel a rising need for ‘space’, time for reflection, opportunities to experiment and fail in order to grow as academics. At the same time there is an increasing pressure to graduate on time, to meet deadlines and less tolerance for delay. This pressure is felt by staff members and students alike, and while efficient ways of interaction and organisation seem necessary and desirable, this perception of time-shortness and stress must not override the idea of creating ‘space’ for debates, experiments and engagement in non-assessed activities.

Having identified those five tensions we do not see ourselves in a position to provide the ONE answer of how to solve those “paradoxes”, but staff members may want to reflect upon those tensions when thinking of how to update or improve our teaching. The challenge is to evolve, renew and innovate smartly: in such a way that the poles of the tensions will not inhibit, but even reinforce each other.

5. Suggestions of the project team after interpreting the results

After interpreting and reflecting on the results of our project, we agreed on five central suggestions that we want to propose to reinvigorate PBL as teaching/learning approach in our faculty:

Communicate – Create Space – Integrate Skills – Connect to Research – Vary and Differentiate

First we always explain what we mean by the more general suggestion and what aspects we find important in this regard. Afterwards we outline some more practical ideas that came to our minds¹⁴ and that might be useful to think about. Yet, those are solely first reflections on possible follow-up actions and might need more reflection and consultation with relevant staff members. We conclude our report with a checklist of recommendations differentiated by roles within PBL that might support our positive learning atmosphere.

5.A. *Communicate*

Dedication for teaching is high at FASoS and those involved care about its quality. But because of the growth of our faculty and the various departments and the increasing number of meetings taking place at different levels our conversations and debates often remain scattered. We need to create structures and organize opportunities to meet, to update each other on what we are doing, to share our best practices and to discuss our concerns. Yet this does not mean that we need more communication (and surely not more meetings) but that we have to think about how to make our way of communicating and the sharing of information more efficient and easier to access for all staff members.

As starting points for improving our way of communicating we would suggest the following:

- **between FASoS staff: follow up on the BKO trajectory** and its workshops in the form of regular (voluntary) meetings to discuss teaching issues; These regular meetings could take place every four to eight weeks (e.g. in the late afternoon/evening to avoid overlap with teaching duties) and cover various challenges that we encounter in our daily teaching; few staff members could be asked to share their experience with tackling different issues in an efficient manner and this way teaching staff could exchange good practices, also between the various programmes of ES and AC/CW. The bringing together of staff from different programmes would cut across the usual Programme meetings (e.g. ES meeting) and would allow for more contact between the different departments. Furthermore, this additional possibility of discussing aspects related to teaching would decrease the agenda for the programme meetings and for coordination meetings of specific courses (e.g. coordinators could be asked which specific challenges they predict for teaching staff of their respective courses at this time, so that these aspects could also be covered).

These workshop meetings could also be perceived as follow-up training for new staff members. The PBL introductory training can only fill the role as providing the starting point, but this additional forum would allow new staff members to get to know the faculty and to reflect on various aspects of their teaching activities. The participation of more experienced staff members could be voluntary, but they might be especially interested in external guest speakers who talk about specific topics as experts (e.g. group dynamics; or colleagues from other faculties talking about their PBL experience or course designs etc);

[this could be similar to the FASoS education day, but spread over more meetings what would allow staff members to participate more flexibly in line with their own agendas]

¹⁴ Many of our suggestions for improvement imply EXTRA effort, while we also diagnose overloaded agendas. This comes back to the need to make clear choices and to back up the ambition of excellent teaching quality with the necessary resources.

- **from a technical perspective: get Eleum or other innovative electronic platforms to work** for us, not the other way around. We use Eleum for communicating with students but it is not user-friendly and mostly neither students nor staff members seem to know how to use it effectively. Having an electronic platform that allows staff members to share and access information quickly and transparently might be an environmentally friendly, effective and useful tool.
- **in BA AC/CW:** talk about the structure and identity of the programme [see more detailed suggestions by Ulrike in part 4. A.]

5.B. Create Space

Pressures (to be efficient, to succeed, to excel) have always been high and will only increase in the future. To be demanding in terms of content is at the heart of the quality of teaching. But to realize the promises of an academic (PBL) education, we should beware of overloading our programs ('coveritis') and try to protect and open up space, for example for following aspects:

- * To listen to each other (students-students; tutors-tutors; students-tutors etc)
- * For experiments, for opportunities to fail and to learn from mistakes
- * To evaluate and provide feedback on learning processes and skills
- * To reflect on what is happening in the world and how what we are doing relates to that – on what it means to be a university
- * To take students seriously in their role as young researchers – to learn from the many different experiences and backgrounds of our students - to hear and discuss their concerns
- **Select few main course objectives when revising course (not more, but less content):** PBL is not the most efficient manner of knowledge transfer but its rationale is that learning is more sustainable and profound. Yet, in order to allow for this learning process to succeed, time has also to be left for students to discover the topic, to take U-turns, to perhaps take a wrong decision but still manage to cover the content etc. A focus on fewer content and course objectives also would create space for tutorial groups to link their investigations more strongly to current events and to also discuss those links, without losing time that should be used for the normal post/prediscussion. By reducing the amount of content to be covered there is also more time for students to actually listen to each other and exchange their experiences from the self-study, as then they would not have to fear to not have enough time for comparing their research results in the post-discussion; Last but not least, less content also allows to discuss and reflect in the tutorial together on their progress in the learning process, while now there is often not enough time for this important step.
A related suggestion here would be to open one "problem" in every course book for the (new) coordinator to experiment with (e.g. by linking to own research or also by allowing for space to discuss topical news or ask for students' input).
- **Experiment with multiple and different exam moments:** also leave room for failing without direct consequences where students can experiment; For example, for skills trainings it may suffice to grade with "pass/fail" in order to leave room for students to experiment and try something more extraordinary in tackling their tasks. Even if their implementation then is not too well done they could pass the skills training and learn from their "mistakes" and deficiencies.
- **Within the whole faculty: implicit and explicit reflection** about our (societal) role as university: just a few weeks ago a new strategic outlook was published for our faculty and our university in general; yet, also more debate among and between staff and students might support the manifestation of the feeling as an academic community. While many interesting projects are taking place, these are not too visibly communicated, especially when they are taking place in other departments. Or often also students have no idea about what is going on in terms of research and initiatives in our faculty.

Therefore the contributions of our teaching and research in regard of societal topics should become more visible – and by fostering an exchange create a stronger we-feeling as academic community. Even BA students could this way get a stronger impression of what it means to be part of an academic community. This way the increasing feeling of “verscholing” might also decrease. Staff members meet frequently in research seminars, but it might be an idea to organise monthly “faculty round tables” where staff can introduce their research across disciplines, students can present interesting projects that they were working on, or specific current topics could be discussed from different perspectives. Another way could be to provide more information in the corridors to the teaching rooms and other “walls” of our faculty.

5.C. Integrate Skills

PBL is especially suited to learn and develop certain skills. At the same time those skills are prerequisites to make PBL work. Therefore it is important to be clear and explicit about the skills which are expected and demanded from students and about the ways in which those skills are being practiced and taught. Being explicit about the skills which are part of our BA programmes can also be of value in presenting them to the outside, e.g. in the form of a list of employability skills.

- **Integrate the training and development of skills into curriculum:** PBL trains various skills and those skills are again trained in various courses throughout our BAs – that is at least what we often tell our students. Yet, a clear reflection on what those kinds of skills actually mean and how they are trained in the specific components of a course are often missing. This way, the skills sound mainly as a selling argument rather than a clearly developed concept.

The challenge here is that good students often manage to develop those skills themselves, but it is especially the weaker students who might need more support and explicit emphasis on this skills’ development.

Also, not all courses need to train the same skills. It should be clear which are the basic skills that have to be trained at the beginning, and which additional skills can later be added in the second and third year. In this regard a skills development could be added as additional layer to the (content of the curriculum).

Especially in AC/CW, there is a need to rethink the content and rationale of the existing skills trainings, their connections to the parallel courses and to the overall programme structure.

- **Training for academic staff members in providing feedback on (PBL) skills:** it must not be assumed that social scientists themselves are experts in skills development. A more profound training for staff members in these areas is indispensable – especially when academic staff is asked to provide feedback to students on those aspects.
- **Strengthen student training in (PBL) skills:** integrate PBL training and skills development into curriculum – adjust to their level and their needs;

For new students an introduction to PBL could be a useful tool to help them deal with this new method of learning and to support them in their reflections in regard of their first practical experiences; Furthermore, it seems absolutely necessary that the first few courses also then use PBL as the main teaching method, and explain why they use which form of PBL;

The introduction itself could be done in form of an inter-active lecture about the rationale of PBL, the rationale of the seven-steps-approach or also in the form of a workshop where students reflect about the main aspects of group dynamics. While it would be naïve to think that those kinds of issues can be taught, this kind of training could raise the awareness about important aspects of learning and self-management (as the self-study takes such an important role in PBL) and facilitate the first year of students as independent learners at our faculty.

Yet, students should also be urged throughout the academic year to reflect on their learning processes. Furthermore, they might appreciate possibilities in discussing among each other, but also with staff members practical issues such as of reading, note-taking, time-management etc; This could be organised throughout a lecture series (interactive or organised as kind of round

table) where students and experts can provide tips and share good practices. Furthermore, coordinators could again be asked what kind of specific skills students are challenged with during their course to streamline this voluntary training offer with the actual need of students.

There are two crucial aspects for such an idea to work: First, there should be a discussion and agreement among staff members to what extent a modern university should be responsible for offering students with skills trainings (in contrast to schools for example) or to what extent we expect students to figure those issues out themselves. Second, such training can only work if it is closely interlinked with the curriculum; One idea could be to integrate it in the newly established mentoring system (disadvantage: staff member does not know how student behaves in tutorial); Students could be asked to also reflect on their own skills development as part of their portfolio that they have to develop during this mentoring programme, which is in itself a good thing to facilitate reflection processes, regardless of the mentor's assessment. While such training might work best voluntarily, it could also be an idea that students might have to take 2 out of a couple of training courses per year for their portfolio.

5.D. Connect to Research

To connect research and teaching in a meaningful way is a crucial challenge. The discussion about the structure and content of our teaching programmes should not be separated from discussions about the organization, coherence and focal points of our research. Possibilities to integrate new developments in research into our BA programmes should be explored and encouraged.

- **Increase the visibility of our research to BA students:** Our faculty produces concise yearly research reports, each staff member presents their research on the website and students of course would have access to the publications of staff members via the University library. Yet, to make students more aware of the kinds of research that our faculty is engaged in, we might consider adapting this information to be suitable for students and catch their curiosity: introducing the topics, translating them into contexts that students can relate to and putting our research findings up for discussion would be a necessary step to allow students to grasp the richness of research conducted at FASoS. It might also be an idea to create posters that provide an overview about the research projects in process (e.g. to be put at front desk or reception area) to provide students (and staff members) with updated overviews about the research projects in our faculty.
- **Continue Integrating topical research themes into course content:** The design and revision of our courses should always aim at finding connections with our current research questions and insights and at recombining them with topical 'problems' which trigger the students' curiosity. This should not be a task for coordinators alone, but is best accomplished in an active and communicative cooperation with other coordinators, the original course planning group and tutors. More lectures on current research by experienced researchers, but also by PhD's, would be welcome in the BA programmes.
- **Keep in mind that our education practice should reflect our way of doing research:** The challenge of fruitfully connecting research and teaching is not only a matter of content but also of methodology. PBL is meant to 'imitate research' and therefore asks naturally for a strong linkage between the two dimensions of academic work. Within PBL there should be enough room to explore and incorporate approaches which are related to different kinds of research methodologies, from empirical to hermeneutical.
- **Be aware that role-models for students:** The contact and interaction with staff who is engaged in the process of doing research can be of invaluable importance for students. This has been confirmed by the positive experiences of the MARBLE-program at our faculty. We could try to extend such experiences to all BA students and to provide similar 'research' experience within the process of a regular course.

5.E. Vary and Differentiate

Interdisciplinarity, the variety of perspectives, views and approaches lies at the heart of the content of our teaching. We should also cherish the variety of styles and methods of teaching at FASoS. PBL should never be rigidly applied in a formulaic way. But it is crucial that we are explicit about the different ways in which we shape our teaching, that we explain to our students and to each other what exactly is done differently and why it is done differently. Variety between courses allows for an interesting curriculum and for engaging in different research methods and topics, and for the training of various skills.

- **Keep on differentiating:** there is no one best way - what makes sense for a particular part of the programme may not be helpful for other parts of the curriculum. Variation, also in terms of organization, is necessary given the different conditions and backgrounds: it is normal that a 1st year course with up to 10 tutors requires a different approach from a small specialization course where the coordinator is the only tutor.

More disagreement exists about the question to what extent there should be space for individual teaching styles and diversity between tutorial groups within one course. In terms of style, this should be no question - as long as tutors are approachable and use PBL, their individual style should be supported and students should adapt to it. In terms of content, PBL as student-centred approach would assume that different groups focus on different aspects of a certain topic or approach it from different angles. Yet, at the same time students are reluctant to engage in this more open-ended endeavour, considering that they all have to write the same exams at the end and often panic that they will be left behind. Also our current practice of providing required literature for specific assignments makes this more open approach more questionable, as this key literature would then have to be supplemented by literature that fits the respective learning objectives of the tutorial group. While the latter in itself could be considered part of the trained skills (i.e. how and where to find suitable literature) students seem often unwilling to cope with this extra-task in addition to covering the main literature; There is no perfect solution to this tension between flexibility and coherence, but it might be useful to vary in the approach throughout the courses, and also to vary between courses when taking into account what kind of skills are prioritised to be trained in a certain course.

- **Communicate choices and variations clearly:** students increasingly ask to be informed about why certain (didactical or PBL) choices are made in order to better understand what to expect in a course and to be informed about those deliberate decisions beforehand, e.g. in the course book. At the same time this also means that students but also tutors have to read the course books.
- **Sometimes, be uncomfortable and confront:** This tension of flexibility-coherence, however, also links to a more fundamental question about what we want to achieve with our education and to what extent our teaching should not just follow students' interests (as a basic principle in PBL) but also their demands in terms of being able to study a certain subject most 'efficiently'. Evaluations emphasise often "best practices" as identified by students, but those alone should not mean that all our teaching should just be standardised according to this one way. It also has to be asked to what extent it is absolutely necessary for an academic institution to also train students in ways of learning and researching that they do not feel most comfortable with.
- **Variation in well-designed assignments:** assignments are the starting point for every PBL process and therefore play an important role in motivating students in their learning process. Yet, we often rely too strongly on the same form of assignments; the possibilities for different kinds of assignment (e.g. by also intersecting PBL-seven steps with closed reading, discussion of theoretical texts) should be explored more in depth. Also, the feedback on assignments could be organized more systematically. Furthermore, more training and tips of what to take into account when writing assignments would be helpful for staff members.
- **Revitalise the idea of coordination teams, at least for updating/revising course books:** Course books are the central material that we use for our courses, yet often it is only the coordinator

who checks, revises and reads the course books before they go to print. If coordinators could exchange with other coordinators or even with a few tutors (e.g. of related courses) to trust that also someone else read the course book carefully, more coherence and mistakes could be avoided.

What do we need for PBL to work – what can YOU do to make it work even better?

A checklist

STUDENTS

- Talk to ALL of your fellow students, not just your friends; Connect between ES-AC/CW students
- Talk to your tutorial group also outside classroom
- Take responsibility for your own learning process
- Reflect on your PBL skills and work on them (talk with colleagues about that)
- Develop an active research attitude: be more proactive in consulting information about research at your own faculty – be part of the academic community
- Provide constructive feedback but accept choices provided & read course books and other information provided

TUTORS

- Ask your colleagues how things are going and what they are doing (i.e. take time for exchanging and sharing experience)
- Provide feedback to your students on group work and PBL skills
- Be aware that you are taking over the role as a bridge and communicator between the learning and researching communities; students perceive you as role-models; emphasize that PBL is research;
- Develop your own style but at same time stick to overall rules of the faculty / the course;
- Create a good atmosphere for students – be aware that you are their link to the academic staff; yet at the same time keep challenging them
- Try to explain the goal of the course in the beginning and also give your students more orientation of how the course is integrated in the ‘plot’ of the BA-program

COURSE COORDINATORS & PROGRAMME DESIGNERS

- Continue explaining choices of programme/course design to staff members & students
- Try to explain the special position of your course in the chronology of the BA-program also in the blockbook
- Continue organizing re-newel (updating) of block books
- Re-organize the good old curriculum conference and foster communication about the content and interrelatedness of the courses, the ‘plot’ of the BA-program (AC/WC).
- Insert introductory PBL and other skills training for students in the beginning of the first year
- Leave space for reflection on skills, and provide plot for skills development in the curriculum.

- Facilitate opportunities to integrate current research into programmes; Introduce research fields to students (put up posters on the wall)
- Continue learning from best practices from course elements but do not copy without allowing for variation; in terms of course design but also in regard of examination and organizational practices;
- Continue allowing and creating variation between courses but also within courses in terms of PBL approach and assignment texts

MANAGING LEVEL

- Keep and perhaps even reinforce training for staff and students in PBL skills (as follow up on very positively perceived BKO trajectory)
- Offer additional training for staff members on group dynamics, different forms of PBL and teaching styles – help staff to feel comfortable in their (at the beginning unusual) role as facilitator
- Facilitate opportunities to integrate current research into programmes; Introduce research fields to students (put up posters on the wall) (together with course coordinators and programme designers)
- Keep facilitating interdisciplinarity and communication between departments – ensure that interaction and cooperation remains
- Create an improved online platform where information on teaching can be easily accessed and exchanged
- Make clear what is non-negotiable and where variation is appreciated and helpful

Annex

Annex I – Questionnaire

Annex II – Detailed Analysis of Questionnaire Data

 The Crucial Elements of Problem-Based Learning

 Advantages of PBL for students

 Advantages of PBL for staff

 Challenges of PBL for staff

 Challenges of PBL for students

Annex II – Pictures of Focus Group Outcomes

Annex I – Questionnaire

How and what do we as FASoS staff members think about PBL? To get a more structured picture of your opinion, we would kindly ask you to fill in this short questionnaire.

Q1. What are, in your view, the three crucial elements that describe the PBL approach at FASoS?

(in order of priority)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Q2. To what extent do you enjoy teaching with PBL?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at all

very much

Q3. To what extent do you perceive PBL as a suitable teaching method for FASoS?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Not at all

very much

Q4. Now please think about your personal experience as a tutor at FASoS. What positive experiences does teaching with PBL bring *for staff members*?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Q5. What would you consider the main challenges that staff members have to deal with when teaching with PBL (perhaps in comparison to earlier teaching experience that you might have)?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Q6. Please think about the pros and cons of learning with PBL *for students*, and name advantages and disadvantages for the learning progress of students that you observed yourself:

	+		-
1.		1.	
2.		2.	
3.		3.	

Q7. Imagine you would be asked to come up with three suggestions for change in the teaching practice at FASoS - what would these be?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Q9. Any other observations/expectations/concerns in regard to PBL that you want to share with us?

.....

.....

Q10. And last, some questions about yourself. Please be reassured that this information will be used in aggregated form only, for statistical purposes.

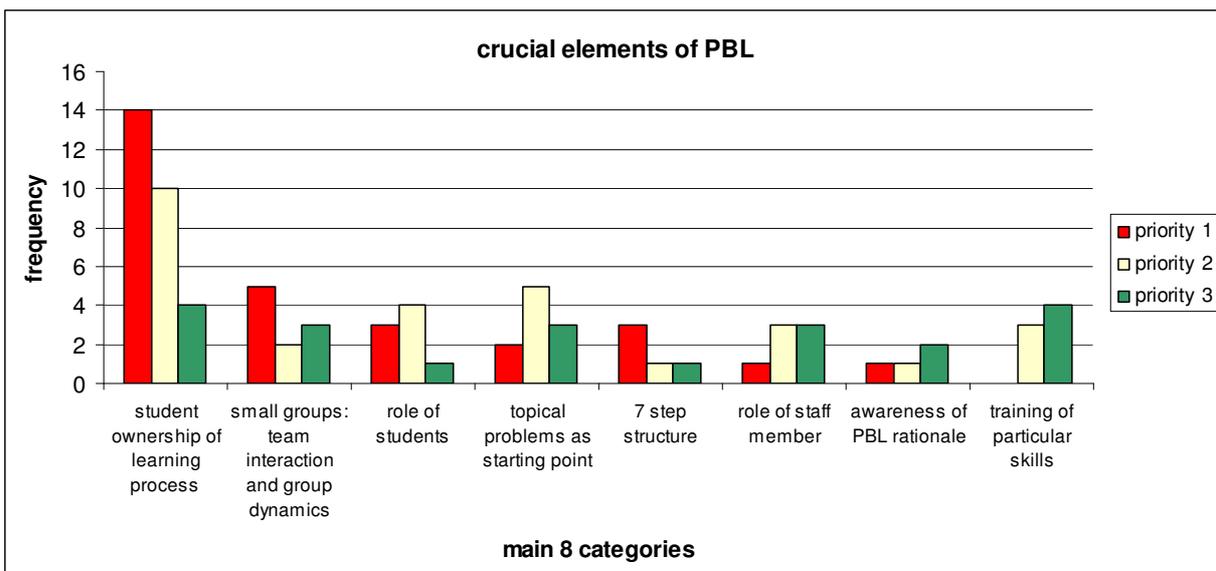
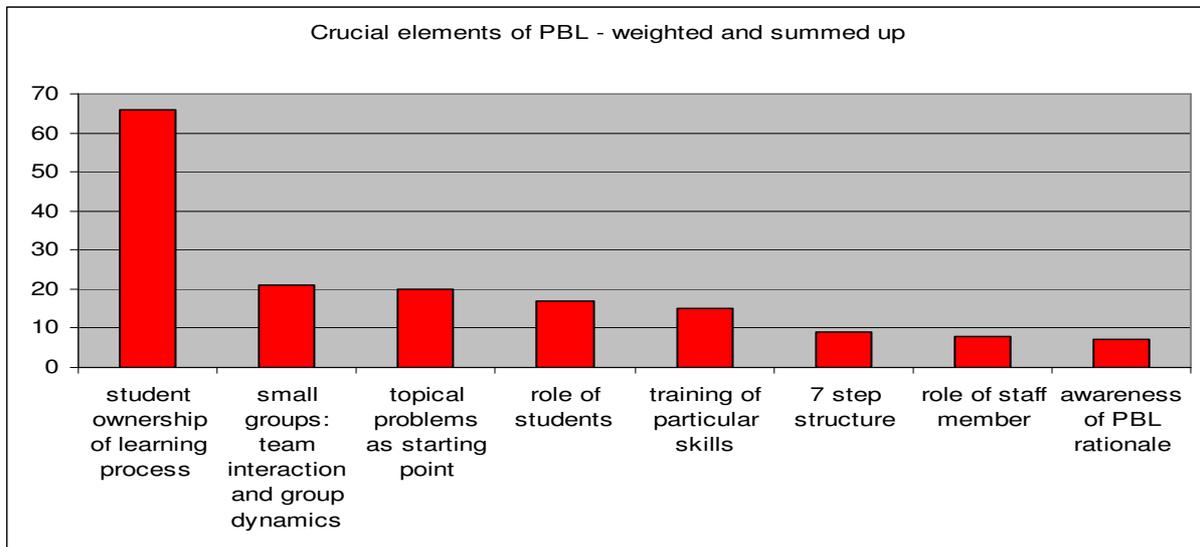
- Sex/Gender: female male
- Year of Birth: _____
- What role(s) did you fulfil at FASoS so far (multiple answers possible)?
 - Course planning and construction Coordination Giving lecture Tutoring Student
- How long have you been a staff member at FASoS? _____ years
- How many years of experience in teaching did you have before joining FASoS? _____ years
- Which Department are you member of?
 - History
 - Literature & Arts
 - Philosophy
 - Political Science
 - Technology & Society Studies
- In which programme(s) are you mainly teaching? (multiple answers possible)
 - BA Arts and Culture
 - BA European Studies

 - MA Analysing Europe
 - MA Arts and Heritage
 - MA Arts and Sciences
 - MA European Public Affairs
 - MA European Studies
 - MA European Studies on Society, Science and Technology
 - MA Globalization and Development Studies
 - MA Media Culture
 - MSc Cultures of Arts, Science and Technology (two year, research masters)
 - MSc European Studies (two years, research master)
 - Others?: _____

Annex II – Detailed Analysis of Questionnaire Data

The crucial Elements of Problem-Based Learning

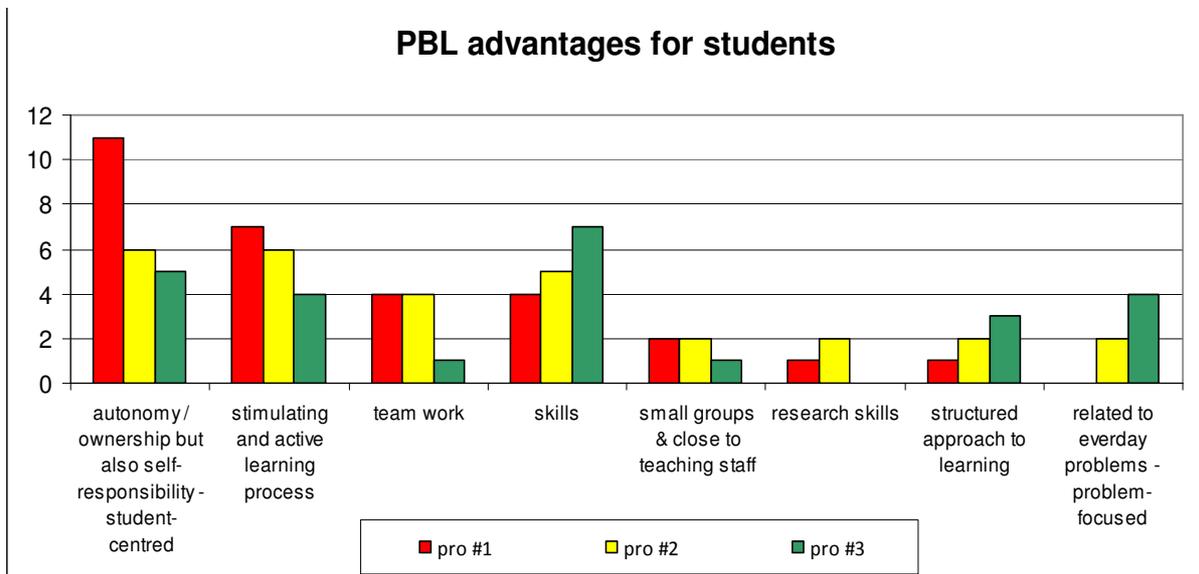
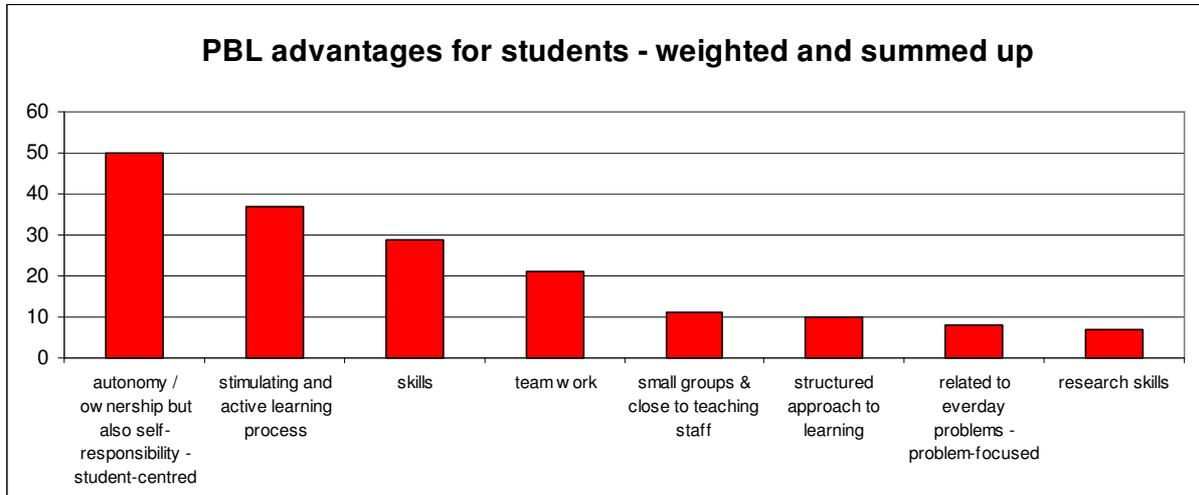
Q1. What are, in your view, the three crucial elements that describe the PBL approach at FASoS? (in order of priority)



category	Means...
student ownership of learning process	active role in own learning process - self-responsibility and ownership
small groups: team interaction and group dynamics	small groups - team interaction and group dynamics
role of students	role of students in tutorial towards others and staff (leadership skills)
topical problems as starting point	topical problems as starting point (interdisciplinary, motivating, topical..)
7 step structure	structure / 7-steps
role of staff member	role of staff member
awareness of PBL rationale	awareness of what PBL means
training of particular skills	training of particular skills

Advantages of PBL for students

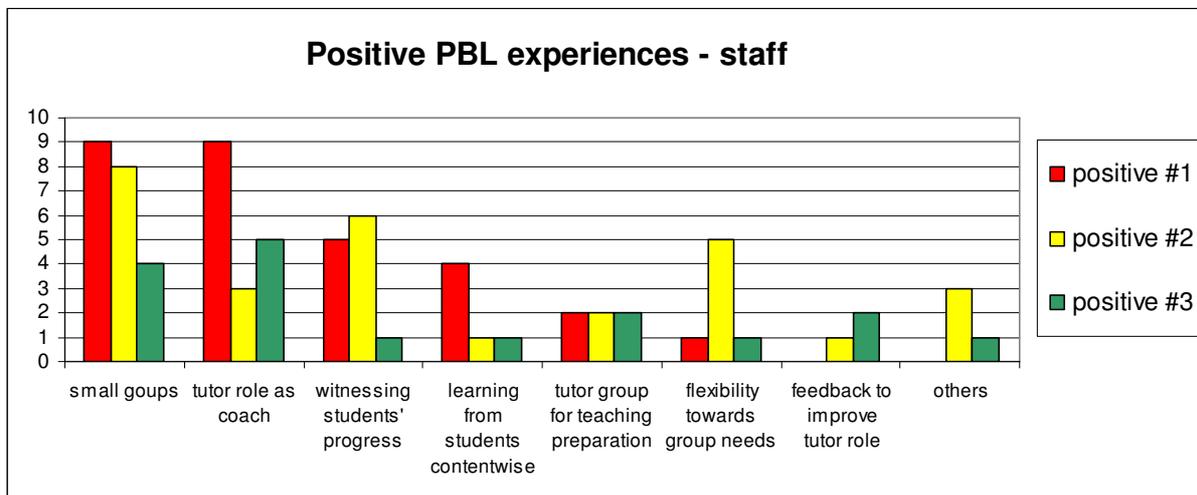
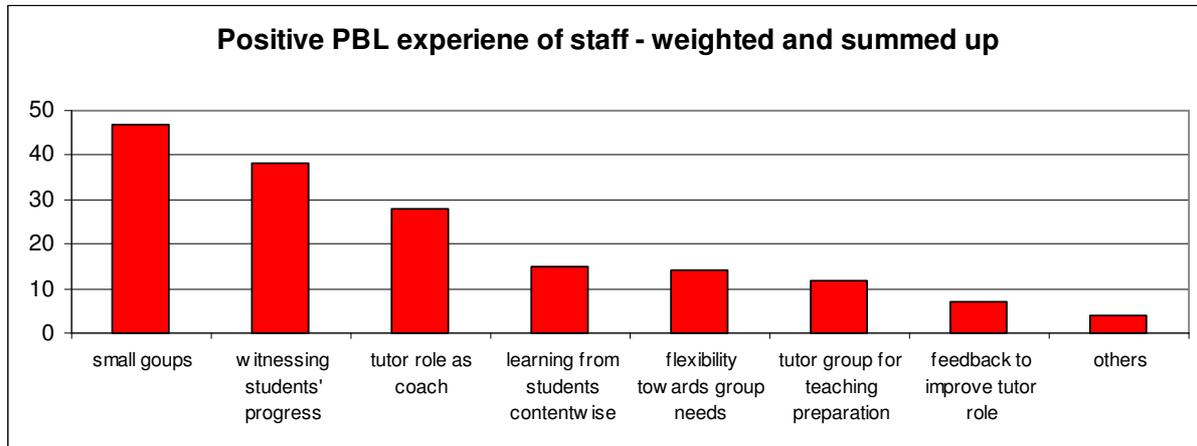
Q6. Please think about the pros and cons of learning with PBL for students, and name advantages and disadvantages for the learning progress of students that you observed yourself.



category	This implies
autonomy/ownership but also self-responsibility; student-centered	think themselves, raising problems/questions, bottom-up, follow own interests, self-study, need to be prepared, active learning attitude
stimulating and active learning process	constructive discussions, imitates research, 7 steps provide structure/safety, discussion & evaluation, active discussions, deep learning
skills	analyzing, discussing, learn to speak in public, reading, time management, cognitive work, critical thinking, summarise arguments, chairing, critical stance
team work	help/learn from other students, oral exchange, chairing/group dynamics, all on the same page; encourages teamwork, interactivity
small groups & close to teaching staff	number of students
structured approach to learning	more guided reading (subcategory of stimulated and active learning process)
related to everyday problems - problem-focused	integrating knowledge in problem-context, challenging problems
research skills	

Advantages of PBL for staff

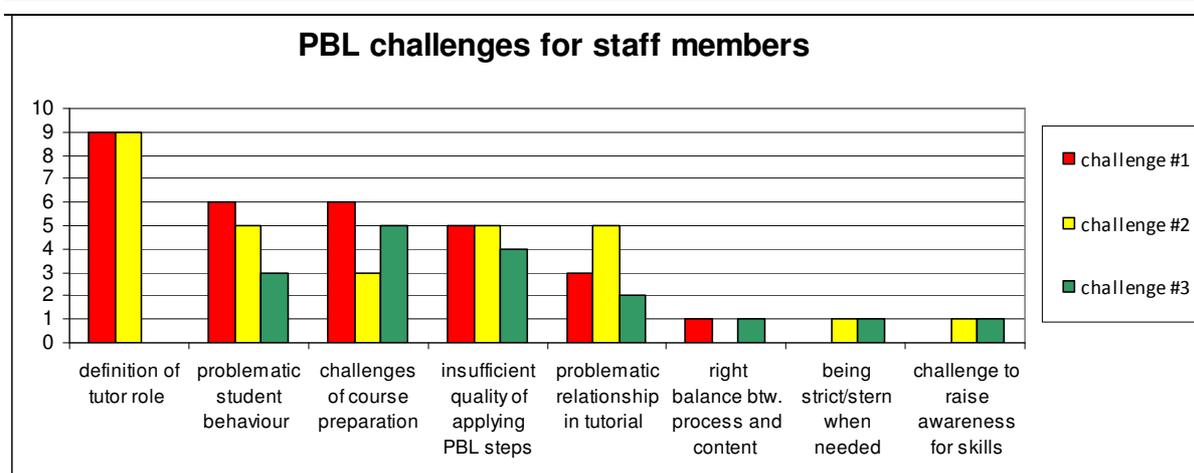
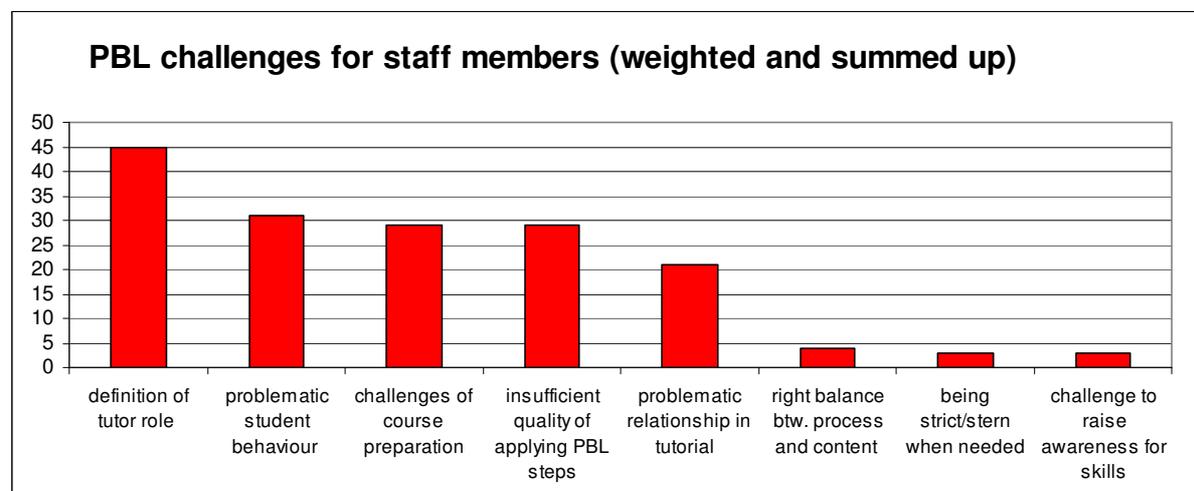
Q4. Now please think about your personal experience as a tutor at FASoS. What positive experiences does teaching with PBL bring *for staff members*?



category	This implies
small groups	intensive interaction in small groups (number of students) - unconstrained atmosphere, more relaxed than lectures; more commitment, more personal contact; <u>room for creative thinking</u>
tutor role as coach	tutor role (being coach not lecturer, activate students, fostering understanding instead of factual knowledge; redirect questions to students to make them think) student-initiative; being on equal level with students (more comfortable); being able to interfere with <u>group dynamics</u> ; <u>support students in group learning</u>
witnessing students' progress	witnessing results and achievements (group achievement, personal development, growth) - students take responsibility - "rewarding to see learning as it happens"
learning from students contentwise	learning from students and new content, rethink own problems and approach - e.g. <u>interdisciplinarity</u> raises awareness about own area; makes teaching/research close
tutor group for teaching preparation	positive effects of teaching in PBL system: interaction with colleagues for teaching preparation (multidisciplinary), creativity in preparing courses, teaching in team and learning from each other; improves management and coordination skills
flexibility towards group needs	immediacy of feedback - flexibility towards group needs - targeted teaching possible - getting better picture of student understanding
feedback to improve tutor role	immediacy of feedback - to improve tutor role (skills for group dynamics - e.g. observation skills, patience)
others	structure, analysing problem, flexibility

Challenges of PBL for staff

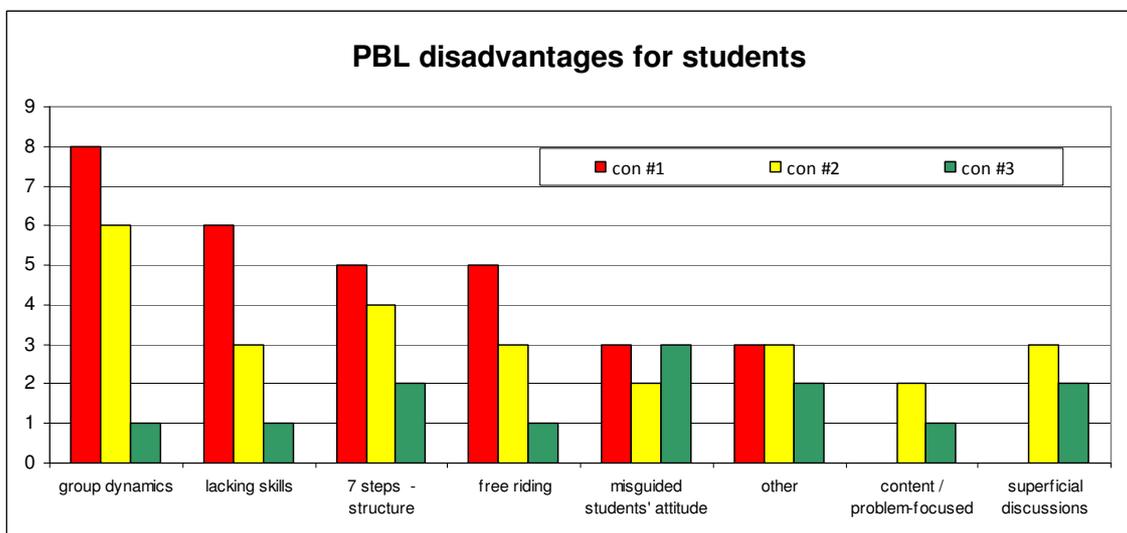
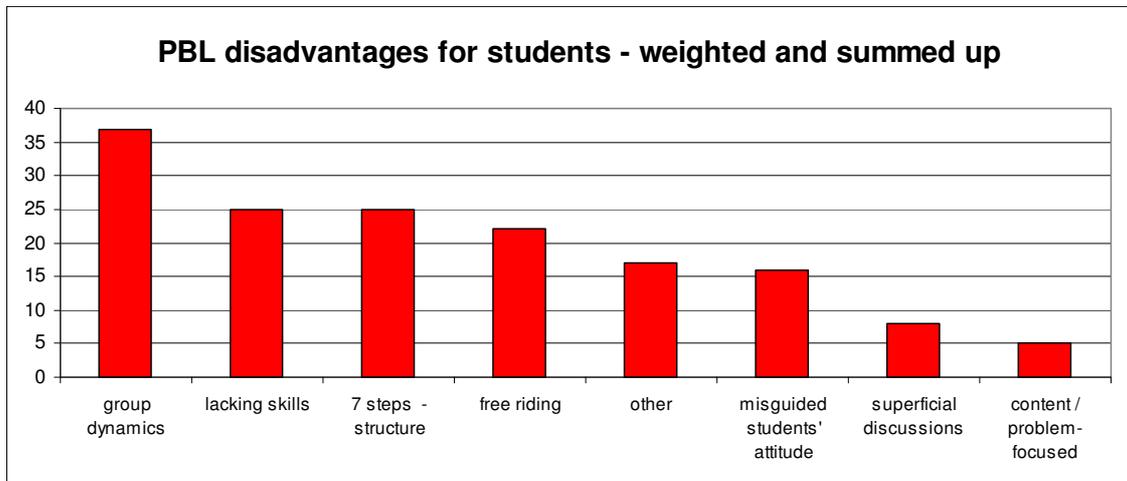
Q5. What would you consider the main challenges that staff members have to deal with when teaching with PBL (perhaps in comparison to earlier teaching experience that you might have)?



category	This implies
definition of tutor role	skill to intervene without disturbing; not being a teacher, less speaking etc; relationship chair/tutor; support students in structuring material; make them grasp overall idea; expectations from students towards tutor
problematic student behaviour	silent, unprepared, unmotivated, free-riding; weak chairs; wide range of motivation
challenges of course preparation	manage intensity of teaching; more preparation because not own field of expertise; coordination, making it interdisciplinary; link to own research; need of updating; write good assignment texts
insufficient quality of applying PBL steps	skipping or rushing through steps; insufficient depth of discussion; no wider picture but focus on questions due to group dynamics; knowing learning goals from year before ; not only rehearsing texts but discuss problems, PBL as mechanical routine - too much scheme with 7 step - but also again and again 7 steps becomes repetitive
problematic relationship in tutorial	difficult group dynamics: engaging ALL students (without domination of some "stop the folks who talk too much") - motivate students;
right balance btw. process and content	
being strict/stern when needed	
challenge to raise awareness for skills	Raise awareness for group dynamics, PBL, convince students of importance of PBL

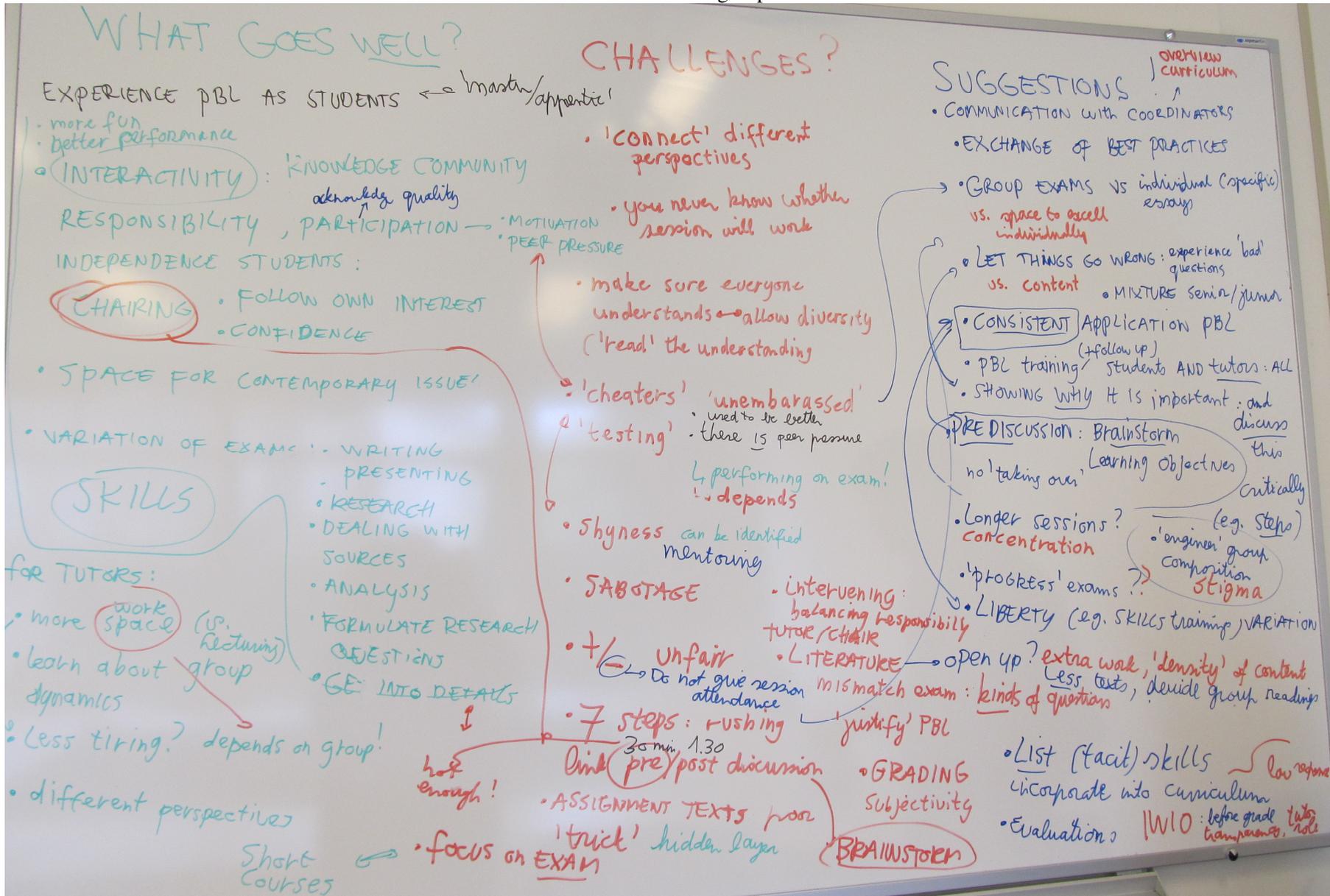
Challenges of PBL for students

Q6. Please think about the pros and cons of learning with PBL for students, and name advantages and disadvantages for the learning progress of students that you observed yourself.



category	This implies
group dynamics	group dependent / group reliant - dependent on group to work ; not everyone comfortable speaking, shy students are left behind; bullshitters take over discussion;
lacking skills	reading, writing) - no guidance in close reading; weak chairing, assessing argument of one text/author, loose structure, not getting an overview, difficult for youngsters, self-discipline
7 steps - structure	no flexibility, slavishly following, boring, routine, process restrictions, prescribed readings; 8th-step is missing (reflection on what was left out the week before)
free riding	rely on group to do work, parasites
Misguided students' attitude	miss guidance - students seeking conformation - exam thinking - tolerance for uncertainty needed ; what do we have to know for the exam? "not having easily digestible lists of the most important issues", no peer feedback
other	loads for self-study, loads of readings, costs a lot of extra time, own input is lacking; cherry-picking of literature; testing; time-intense- demanding in terms of preparation
content and problem-focus	not all content matches PBL format - eclectic focus on certain problems - fake problem
superficial discussions	middle segment of students - excellence are done disservice; having to speak before you really worked it out

Annex III - Focus group outcomes



Annex III - Focus group outcomes II

WHAT GOES WELL?

- Space for individual teaching styles **diversity**
 - motivating
- junior staff: opportunity to make own course/lecture
- senior staff: accessible
- Students develop skills:
 - analysis
 - interactivity
 - articulate ideas
 - group communication
 - giving feedback
- room for explaining **relevance**
- structured, providing basic steps
- learning to deal with groups, styles, dynamics
- seeing students 'bloom'
- contact with 'knowledgeable guide' twice a week + self study

AC vs. ES:

- more open
- more individual
- more courage: explain what it is
- think more independently
- no other choice

 Career focus, curriculum clearer, extra curricular, grades, **competitive**

students now more assertive → vs. group

CHALLENGES?

- balancing 'content' and 'group dynamics': **energy**
- student motivation
- workload for students
- participation, competition
- division - 'responsible'
- chalking
- make students realise 'necessity' of PBL
- group dynamics determines **quality**
 - pre - post discussion
 - 30 min or less
 - 1/2 h
- Assignment texts - pivotal role!
- 'admit' unclear concepts
 - course too difficult to little time
 - insecurity: EXPERTISE
 - COHESION
 - Structure → tutor must consistently watch 'MARBLE' talk

OLD vs. NEW Courses

Quality → EXAM about **you realise what you really learned only later**

SUGGESTIONS

- Senior staff more visible: lectures, contact **support staff**
- mindmapping (prediscussion)
- create a good atmosphere
- be easy going and strict: clear expectations include
- ET students screw up! finding literature
- discuss necessary **skills** with students
 - (separate workshop?)
 - repeat
 - reading time management
- tutor relates texts/assignments/courses explains **relevance**, connect
- introductory tests course book: read it!
- AC: first course should be PBL

PBL should be **consistent**

- Shared responsibility
- tutors grade papers of own students
- develop own courses
- no lecturing in PBL session they are in charge
- LITERATURE? room for additional in 2nd year?