ISSN 2663-8169 Vol. 6, Issue 8: 166-171, DOI: 10.25236/IJNDE.2024.060826

Exploring the Reform of Clinical Medical Education in Universities Based on Problem-Based Learning

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Abstract: *In recent years, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has gained widespread attention and application in medical education globally. Clinical medical education in China faces issues such as a disconnect between theory and practice and a lack of students' self-directed learning abilities, necessitating educational reform to improve teaching quality and outcomes. This paper explores the basic connotation and theoretical foundation of PBL and its application in clinical medical education. It analyzes the design and implementation strategies of PBL teaching and discusses its effects and challenges in various teaching segments. Finally, the paper forecasts innovative directions and sustainable development for PBL teaching reform, aiming to provide reference and guidance for the reform of clinical medical education in China.*

Keywords: *Problem-Based Learning (PBL), clinical medical education, teaching reform, self-directed learning, teaching outcomes*

1. Introduction

Medical education is a crucial stage in cultivating high-quality medical professionals. However, the current clinical medical education model exhibits numerous issues in practice, such as a disconnect between theory and practice and insufficient clinical thinking and comprehensive abilities among students. Problem-Based Learning (PBL), as a student-centered and problem-oriented teaching model, emphasizes learning through solving real-world problems, helping to cultivate students' self-directed learning abilities and clinical thinking skills. Therefore, exploring the application of PBL in clinical medical education and its teaching reform path has significant research value and practical necessity.

This paper aims to explore the basic connotation and theoretical foundation of PBL, analyze its specific application in clinical medical education, and summarize the problems and challenges encountered in practice. It also proposes corresponding innovation and development directions. Through systematic research and practical exploration, the paper hopes to provide effective theoretical support and practical guidelines for the reform of clinical medical education in China.

2. The Connotation of Problem-Based Learning and Its Application in Clinical Medical Education

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered teaching method that focuses on creating real-world problem scenarios to guide students in self-directed learning and problem-solving, thereby enhancing their knowledge acquisition and application skills. The concept of PBL was first introduced by American neurobiologist Howard Barrows in the 1960s and initially applied in the field of medical education. Barrows believed that traditional medical education models overly relied on lecture-based teaching and lacked the cultivation of students' abilities to solve actual clinical problems. PBL effectively addresses this deficiency by driving learning through real problems, allowing students to develop a systematic knowledge structure and problem-solving skills through self-exploration and cooperative learning.

The development of PBL has undergone several stages. Starting from its initial application in the medical field, it gradually expanded to various disciplines, including engineering, law, and education. In the 1980s, PBL rapidly spread in medical schools across North America and Europe, becoming the primary teaching method in many top medical schools. For example, McMaster University Medical School, Harvard Medical School, and the University of Massachusetts Medical School have actively adopted the PBL model, promoting its widespread application globally.

With the rapid development of information technology, the implementation forms of PBL have

ISSN 2663-8169 Vol. 6, Issue 8: 166-171, DOI: 10.25236/IJNDE.2024.060826

continually innovated. The integration of online learning platforms, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) technologies has further enriched PBL teaching practices. Online learning platforms provide students with abundant learning resources and convenient communication channels, breaking the limitations of time and space, making PBL implementation more flexible and efficient. VR and AR technologies construct realistic virtual clinical scenarios, offering students immersive learning experiences that enhance their clinical practice skills and problem-solving abilities.

Additionally, the application of PBL in practice continues to deepen and expand. Initially applied in single disciplines, it has gradually developed into a multidisciplinary teaching model, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration. The multidisciplinary integration characteristic of PBL enables students to comprehensively apply knowledge from multiple disciplines in solving complex problems, fostering systematic thinking and comprehensive abilities.

2.1 The Theoretical Foundations of Problem-Based Learning

The theoretical foundations of PBL mainly include constructivist learning theory, cognitive psychology, and social interaction theory. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that learning is an active process of knowledge construction, where students gradually build their knowledge systems through interactions with the environment and others. PBL aligns with the basic principles of constructivism by setting real-world problem scenarios, prompting students to actively explore, discover, and construct knowledge during problem-solving.

Cognitive psychology posits that learning is not just knowledge transmission but also the reorganization and optimization of cognitive structures. PBL promotes the optimization and enhancement of students' cognitive structures by guiding them to analyze and solve complex problems, enabling them to better understand and apply learned knowledge. Social interaction theory emphasizes that learning is a social process. Through group collaboration and discussion, students inspire and support each other, improving learning outcomes. PBL enhances students' communication skills and teamwork spirit through group collaborative learning, aiding their social development.

2.2 The Core Characteristics of Problem-Based Learning

As a student-centered teaching method, PBL has the following core characteristics:

Student-Centered: PBL emphasizes students' initiative and subjectivity in the learning process. Teachers transition from traditional knowledge transmitters to learning facilitators and promoters. Students actively participate in knowledge construction and problem-solving through self-directed learning and group collaboration.[1]

Problem-Driven Learning Process: The core of PBL is to stimulate students' interest and motivation by setting complex, real-world problem scenarios. Students explore, discuss, and research around the problems, learning relevant knowledge and skills in the process of problem-solving.

Combination of Group Collaboration and Self-Directed Learning: PBL emphasizes group collaborative learning. Through team discussions and cooperation, students jointly solve problems. In groups, students play different roles, supporting and inspiring each other, collectively enhancing learning outcomes. Meanwhile, PBL also focuses on cultivating students' self-directed learning abilities, requiring them to independently search for information, analyze problems, and propose solutions under the guidance of teachers.

Emphasis on Process Evaluation and Feedback: PBL stresses the evaluation of the learning process. Using diversified evaluation methods (such as learning logs, case analyses, and oral reports), it provides timely feedback on students' learning outcomes and existing problems, helping them continually improve and enhance.

Through these core characteristics, PBL effectively integrates knowledge learning with actual problem-solving, cultivating students' comprehensive qualities and abilities, and providing an innovative teaching model for clinical medical education.

ISSN 2663-8169 Vol. 6, Issue 8: 166-171, DOI: 10.25236/IJNDE.2024.060826

3. Exploration of the Application of Problem-Based Learning in Clinical Medical Education

3.1 PBL Teaching Design and Implementation Strategies

The core of PBL teaching design and implementation strategies lies in constructing real-world problem scenarios that stimulate students' interest in learning and cultivate their clinical thinking skills. Through scientific teaching organization and management, the effective implementation of PBL can be ensured. The specific strategies are as follows:

3.1.1 Course Design and Problem Selection

Course Design: In course design, PBL modules should be reasonably set to complement traditional teaching models. The design of PBL modules should align with course objectives and the actual needs of students, ensuring systematic and coherent content.

Problem Selection: Select problems with clinical relevance that are open-ended, complex, and multi-layered. These problems should encompass multidisciplinary knowledge, encouraging students to think comprehensively and apply their knowledge to solve issues.

3.1.2 Integration of Teaching Resources

Multidisciplinary Integration: PBL courses should integrate multidisciplinary knowledge, reflecting the comprehensiveness and intersectionality of clinical practice. Through cross-disciplinary collaboration and exchange, students can gain a broader knowledge perspective and problem-solving abilities.

Application of Information Technology: Utilize modern information technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and simulated patients to enhance the interactivity and realism of PBL teaching, thereby improving students' learning experience and outcomes.[2]

3.1.3 Teaching Organization and Management

Group Collaborative Learning: Divide students into several groups, each consisting of 5-8 members. Appoint a group leader and recorder responsible for organizing and documenting group discussions. Teachers act as facilitators and supporters, providing appropriate guidance and assistance.

Learning Process Management: Set clear learning objectives and plans, conduct regular stage summaries and reflections to ensure continuous student progress and improvement. Teachers should monitor each student's learning dynamics, providing timely feedback and guidance.

3.1.4 Evaluation and Feedback

Diversified Evaluation: Teachers can employ diverse evaluation methods such as learning logs, case analysis reports, and oral presentations to comprehensively assess students' learning outcomes and capability enhancement. Emphasizing a combination of formative and summative evaluations ensures comprehensiveness and objectivity in the assessment process.

Timely Feedback: Teachers should provide timely feedback on students' learning achievements and existing problems, helping them identify shortcomings, improve learning strategies, and enhance learning effectiveness.

3.2 Application of PBL in Different Teaching Segments

As a flexible teaching method, PBL can be widely applied in various segments of clinical medical education, specifically as follows:

3.2.1 Application of PBL in Theoretical Classroom Teaching

Case Introduction: In theoretical classes, teachers can introduce typical clinical cases to guide students in discussing and analyzing the issues within the cases, thereby stimulating their interest and motivation for learning.

Problem Discussion: In classroom teaching, teachers should integrate knowledge points with actual cases, set relevant problems, guide students to discuss in groups, propose solutions, and present and exchange ideas in class.[3]

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3.2.2 Application of PBL in Laboratory Internships

Simulated Patient Training: In laboratory internships, use simulated patients to set real clinical scenarios. Students diagnose and treat simulated patients, solving actual problems, and cultivating clinical skills and comprehensive abilities.

Clinical Procedure Drills: In the laboratory environment, Teachers should set complex clinical procedure problems for students to solve, aiming to help them master clinical operation skills and improve their practical abilities.

3.2.3 Application of PBL in Clinical Clerkships

Clinical Rotation Learning: During clinical clerkships, students rotate through different departments, encountering various clinical cases. Through problem-based learning, they develop comprehensive diagnostic and treatment abilities. Teachers should set specific learning objectives and problems, guiding students in case discussions and solutions.

Clinical Case Discussions: Teachers should regularly organize clinical case discussions for students to conduct in-depth analysis and discussion around specific cases, propose diagnostic and treatment plans, and receive feedback and guidance from teachers.

3.3 Problems and Challenges in Practice

Despite the significant advantages of PBL in clinical medical education, several problems and challenges remain in practical application:

3.3.1 Insufficient Teacher Training

PBL teaching demands high levels of guidance and organizational skills from teachers. However, many teachers currently lack awareness and practical experience in PBL, hindering effective implementation. Therefore, increasing training and support for teachers is essential to enhance their ability and competence in implementing PBL.

3.3.2 Limited Teaching Resources

PBL teaching requires extensive resources and support, such as case libraries, simulated patients, and information technology equipment. However, many universities have limited teaching resources, insufficient to meet PBL demands. Thus, increasing investment in teaching resources, optimizing resource allocation, and improving resource utilization efficiency are necessary.

3.3.3 Incomplete Evaluation Mechanisms

Evaluating the effectiveness of PBL teaching is complex, requiring diversified evaluation methods and scientific evaluation mechanisms. However, many universities currently have incomplete evaluation systems, unable to comprehensively and objectively assess PBL outcomes. Establishing scientific, systematic evaluation mechanisms is crucial to ensure comprehensive and objective assessments.

3.3.4 Student Adaptation Issues

PBL emphasizes self-directed learning and group collaboration, but some students struggle to adapt to this teaching model, lacking self-directed learning abilities and cooperative awareness, which affects learning outcomes. Strengthening guidance and support for students to cultivate their self-directed learning skills and teamwork spirit is necessary.

By actively addressing these problems and challenges, gradually improving PBL teaching implementation strategies and support measures, the advantages of PBL in clinical medical education can be better leveraged, promoting the in-depth development of teaching reform.

4. Problem-Oriented Learning (PBL) Teaching Reform: Innovations and Prospects

4.1 Innovations in PBL Teaching Reform

Problem-oriented learning (PBL) has shown significant results in clinical medicine teaching. However, with the ever-changing medical education environment and rapid technological advancements, PBL teaching reform needs continuous innovation to meet the educational demands of the new era. The following are some innovative directions for PBL teaching reform:

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4.1.1 Integration of Diverse Teaching Models

Blended Learning: Combine PBL with traditional lecture-based teaching, flipped classrooms, and other teaching models to form a blended learning approach. By integrating online and offline methods, theory and practice, the teaching effectiveness can be optimized, enhancing students' learning experiences.[4]

Interdisciplinary Integration: Teachers should promote interdisciplinary PBL (Problem-Based Learning) teaching by integrating clinical medicine with basic medicine, nursing, public health, and other disciplines to develop students' comprehensive abilities and interdisciplinary thinking.

4.1.2 Application of Advanced Educational Technologies

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) Technologies: Utilize VR and AR technologies to create virtual clinical scenarios, providing immersive learning experiences that enhance students' clinical practice skills and problem-solving abilities. For example, VR can simulate complex surgical procedures, allowing students to practice and operate in a virtual environment.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data Analysis: Leverage AI and big data technologies to develop intelligent PBL teaching platforms, enabling personalized learning and precise assessment. By analyzing students' learning data, targeted learning suggestions and feedback can be provided, optimizing teaching effectiveness.

4.1.3 Strengthening International Exchange and Cooperation

International Cooperation Projects: Collaborate with internationally renowned medical schools to carry out PBL teaching exchange programs, sharing teaching resources and experiences to enhance the level of PBL teaching. Through international cooperation, advanced PBL teaching concepts and methods can be introduced, promoting localized innovation.

Internationalized Curriculum Design: Teachers should introduce international curriculum content and cases to cultivate students' global perspectives and cross-cultural communication skills. Through internationalized curriculum design, students' international competitiveness and career development capabilities can be improved.

4.2 Sustainable Development of PBL Teaching Reform

The sustainable development of PBL teaching reform requires systematic design and support in various aspects to ensure long-term effectiveness and far-reaching impact. The following are strategies for the sustainable development of PBL teaching reform:

4.2.1 Establishing a Systematic Teacher Training and Development Mechanism

Teacher Training: Regularly conduct PBL teaching training to enhance teachers' PBL teaching abilities and levels. Through specialized training, seminars, workshops, and other forms, help teachers master PBL teaching theories and practical methods.[5]

Teacher Development: Educational institutions should establish a long-term mechanism for teachers' professional development, providing diverse development opportunities and support. They should encourage teachers to participate in domestic and international academic exchanges and further studies, continually updating their knowledge and skills to improve teaching quality.

4.2.2 Improving Teaching Resources and Support Systems

Resource Allocation: Educational institutions should increase investment in PBL teaching resources, building a rich case library, virtual laboratories, online learning platforms, and more to provide adequate resource support for PBL teaching.

Technical Support: Educational institutions should establish a comprehensive technical support system to ensure the application of information technology in PBL teaching. Through technical support, they should ensure the stable operation of teaching platforms and tools, thereby improving teaching efficiency.

4.2.3 Constructing Scientific Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

Diversified Evaluation: Educational institutions should adopt diversified evaluation methods to comprehensively assess the effectiveness of PBL teaching. They should combine formative and summative evaluations through various forms such as learning logs, case analyses, and oral presentations

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to fully reflect students' learning outcomes and ability improvements.

Feedback Mechanism: Teachers should establish timely and effective feedback mechanisms to help students identify problems and improve learning strategies. Teachers should regularly communicate with students, providing personalized learning suggestions and guidance to promote continuous student progress.

4.2.4 Promoting PBL Teaching Culture Construction

Teaching Culture: The school administration should promote the construction of a PBL teaching culture across the entire school, creating a supportive atmosphere for PBL teaching. Through publicity, demonstration classes, and other methods, they should increase teachers' and students' awareness and recognition of PBL teaching.

Student Participation: The teaching staff should encourage students to actively participate in PBL teaching reform, playing a central role. Through student feedback and course evaluations, they should listen to students' opinions and optimize PBL teaching design and implementation.

By following these innovative directions and sustainable development strategies, PBL teaching reform will have a profound impact on clinical medicine universities, providing strong support for cultivating high-quality medical talents. In the future, with continuous technological advancements and updates in educational concepts, PBL teaching reform will continue to deepen, creating a new landscape for clinical medical education[6].

5. Conclusion

Through the exploration and analysis of the application of problem-based learning (PBL) in clinical medical teaching, the following conclusions are drawn:

Significant Advantages of the PBL Model: PBL effectively enhances students' autonomous learning ability, clinical thinking ability, and comprehensive quality, helping to compensate for the shortcomings of traditional teaching models.

Challenges in Implementing PBL Teaching Reform: During implementation, challenges such as insufficient teacher training, limited teaching resources, and imperfect evaluation mechanisms exist, which require further research and solutions.

Innovation and Sustainable Development of PBL Teaching Reform: Combining new technologies (such as virtual reality and online learning platforms), integrating with other teaching models, and establishing continuous improvement and evaluation mechanisms will help promote the sustainable development of PBL teaching reform.

Future research should focus on long-term tracking of PBL teaching effects and propose specific improvement suggestions to further optimize the application of the PBL model in clinical medical education. Educational institutions should explore the promotion and application of PBL in other disciplines to drive comprehensive reform and development in medical education.

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