

The Way We Were

Introduction to the Readings

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On behalf of the editorial team – Camilla Rams Rathleff, Kathrine Liedtke Thorndal and David Kergel – I have taken it upon myself to write this short introduction to our 2024 Special Issue *Essential readings in Problem-Based Learning*. Like the contributions in this, very special Special Issue, it has an informal tone driven by a personal narrative.

In this issue, we have asked for essential readings. We went looking for texts that could introduce the field to a newcomer, and at the same time were texts that mattered. That carried a special meaning.

About a year ago, I asked my colleagues to look at their own journey and rediscover texts that had helped them, and that had shaped them as researchers. And then I asked them to tell their story and present their chosen text to the rest of us. The exercise started as an activity for a Christmas gathering at IAS-PBL at AAU, and after that, I expanded the idea into the Special Issue call that now has become the issue that you hold in your hands.

It was important to me that the researchers, or should I say, authors viewed their contribution not as an academic work or a scientific publication, but as a chance to speak, to tell their story or any story they believed was important for others in the field. Therefore, we stimulated an informal tone, even personal at times, and a shorter format than a normal scientific paper (in our field). I wanted the Scholar to emerge, and for this Scholar to sit down with me, and talk to me. Inspiring me to read, to think, to wonder. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The American Scholar* was both an inspiration and an example of mine for this idea and for this Special Issue.

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However, we are a scientific peer reviewed journal, and we needed to frame the issue with something more systematic and methodologically acknowledged. This I found, in a talk at a conference on the scholarship of teaching and learning, as I heard about slow reading and the slow movement. The movement has been around for a while and has many cousins, such as slow-food, slow-travel and even slow-medicine. In relation to academia, the movement is mostly a form of counterculture or resistance to ‘the modus 2 science’, ‘the corporate university’ and the present paradigm of quantification, growth and speed in the comprehension of higher education. As such it is often focused on providing a ground for criticism of neoliberalism, capitalism and colonialism while promoting and siding with e.g. feminist and post-human positions. However, it does not have to be as radical as that. In short, slow reading is just a more careful attitude, focusing on working with dense, complex, and important texts, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. To not merely trust in numbers of citations, or in endless needless empirical studies with dubious scientific value, but instead to indulge in the text, making meaning and enriching comprehension. Presented as that it might look like a nostalgic longing for ‘the way we were’, a dream of another time, but I think it can represent an ideal and a method that certainly is achievable. In this Special Issue, the authors take themselves back to ‘the way they were’ at some part of their academic journey and allow themselves to return to a text that meant something, that required attention and that made a difference. A text worthy of a slow reading both then and now.

Nineteen scholars from all over the world answered our call with good and intriguing abstracts. For different reasons, some had to leave along the way, but we thank them for their interest in the idea. In this issue, we present 11 daring and fascinating papers, written by researchers based in Denmark, Sweden, Great Britain, Turkiye and the Netherlands.

Any issue on essential readings in PBL will probably include a reading of some text by the American philosopher, educationist and pragmatist John Dewey. Dewey is inescapable if you want to engage seriously with PBL. He surfaces in papers, dissertations, books and projects, often as a framework, or as a foundation, but sometimes as the very object of investigation. In our issue, we have two papers addressing texts by Dewey. Petersen reads closely the classic work *Democracy and Education* (1916), using this reading to argue for the values of PBL to be in learning itself, and less in extraneous aims like employability. Feldt is reading Dewey’s perhaps slightly less known *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) and chooses to, as he says, dwell on two passages. His close and slow reading carries a similar argument as Petersen’s, warning us of placing too much value on the external goods (here represented by utilitarianism), and instead profoundly valuing the unique and present learning event for its own

sake. Both papers are deeply insightful, and allows for both a stimulating reading of Dewey, and some well-argued thought on the present discourse on the virtues of a PBL approach in education.

For Scandinavian researchers in PBL, some more local theorists carry a lot of weight. Here we are very happy to present three such thinkers in three intriguing papers. Feilberg presents us with Eva Hultengren and her title *Problem-orientation, project work and report writing* from 1976. It had a huge impact on the design and comprehension of PBL at Aalborg University. However, Feilberg succeeds not only in giving us a historical account but is much keener on showing us the ideas in the book as valid approaches to project work and supervision that certainly enriches the present debate and research on the subject. It is a pity the work in focus is only available in the Danish language. Another Danish language work, Jes Adolphsen's *Problems in Science – an epistemological reason for problem orientation* (1992), was mandatory reading for students at Aalborg University. Two such students, Nøhr and Jensen, revisit the book, and take us through their slow reading and through their memories, effectively showing us the two important principles of PBL: student-driven and problem-based. Finally, is the paper by Boelt, that concerns itself with Knud Illeris' *Problem orientation and participant management – an alternative pedagogic* (1974). Boelt's writing is controversial and stretches our understanding of academic texts and academia. For some he goes too far into the personal and illustrative imaginary, for others, he might be spot-on, in terms of refreshing and reshaping the academic format. We will let the reader decide for him- and herself. Regardless, Boelt's reading of Illeris is a journey back to a time of alternatives and countercultures, that also come to predict the outcome-based learning that we have today. This makes it interesting to read Boelt's presentation alongside the ones from Petersen and Feldt, but also to reflect on which predictions today's alternatives and countercultures might unleash.

Jørgensen wants us to understand that the philosophers Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt are important to engage with for PBL researchers, even though they never explicitly wrote about the pedagogical approach of PBL or even about the pedagogical philosophy of problem orientation. But Jørgensen creates a compelling argument that the two well-known thinkers allow us to comprehend PBL as "a personal process of self-formation with important political and ethical implications". By all means, Jørgensen opens the door for Foucault and Arendt showing us that there is definitely something there to be explored.

Savin-Baden does not, like the others, so much look back for her reading, as she chooses to look ahead. Taking us through the creation and deliberation of her own work, co-written with Heather Fraser, *Rethinking Problem-based Learning for*

the Digital Age: A Practical Guide for Online Settings from this year 2024. It is immensely fascinating to read the personal reflections that come from revisiting your own work, now not as a writer, but as a reader. It is an enlightened paper, that, as a bonus, introduces many of the theoretical concepts that the book develops, and that anyone researching or practicing digital PBL undoubtedly will benefit from knowing.

Teaching by means of PBL is central to Kirkgöz, who provides us with her application of Suzy Edwards and Marie Hammers *Laura's Story: Using Problem-Based Learning in Early Childhood and Primary Teacher Education* (2006). You never doubt Kirkgöz' commitment and the importance of the book to her own development of teacher education, but at the same time, she gives us a slow reading that allows the book to shine and to make itself important. A central theme in the book, as well as in the paper, is the mixture of theory and practice that PBL allows for.

From teaching to research. Velmurugan, as Kirkgöz, is also slow reading a work of great importance for him and his professional development. But this time for researching PBL. The work is *Nexus-Analysis – Discourse and the Emerging Internet* (2004) by Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon. Velmurugan presents the book well, and connects the dots to PBL research, by highlighting the social actions and their expressions of meaning by historical bodies, interaction order and discourse. The book might be new to many PBL researchers, but Velmurugan makes sense of it, not only in his own story, and it is always important to recall and reinvestigate the inherited social aspect of PBL.

Forementioned Maggie Savin-Baden is an important thinker for the modern development of PBL, and for Børsen, she provided the paper that unlocked the issue of facilitating successful learning processes in transdisciplinary student groups. Børsen faced the problem as he was making crucial revisions to an educational program involving different disciplines and enrolling students with different disciplinary backgrounds. Savin-Baden's 2016 paper "Impact of Transdisciplinary Threshold Concepts on Student Engagement in Problem-Based Learning" was the key that Børsen needed, and he gives a gripping tale thickened by practical experience and theoretical deliberation. Along the way we become nicely acquainted with Savin-Baden's article and with its ideas, showcasing both papers as indeed an essential reading.

From Ryberg, we have so much more than just a fascinating title. Ryberg also reads an article, or actually two articles. First, he presents "The Tyranny of Participation and Collaboration in Network Learning" (2008) by Debra Ferreday and Vivien Hodgson, and later he supplies us with "Here be Dragons: Approaching Difficult Group Issues in Network Learning" (2014) by Linda Perriton and Michael Reynolds. In a wonderful mixture of personal story and

theorizing the darker sides of group work and collaborations are explored and nuanced. Ryberg manages the difficult task of both engaging and valuing PBL, as he simultaneously criticizes or questions some of its 'taken for granted' perceptions. There is wit, there is humor, and there is a good deal of inspiring slow essential reading.

That sums up the contributions you will find in this Special Issue. It is a great pleasure to present it to the world, and I'm proud of all the authors who dared and shared their stories and readings. Thank you so much!

Finally, I would also like to thank my co-editors for their hard work and commitment to the issue. Without you, the issue would not be. Thank you!

Please, enjoy your reading.