Developing leadership skills using problem based learning - A solution based focus

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Upon graduation from university it is expected that Physiotherapy students will have all the capabilities for clinical practice. The Clinical Leadership Competency Framework (Leadership Academy, 2011) proposes that clinicians require leadership skills to:

- Demonstrate personal qualities of self-awareness and act with integrity.
- Work with others to develop networks, build and maintain relationships, encouraging contribution and work within teams.
- Set direction by applying knowledge and evidence, making decisions and evaluating impact.

Within traditional models of teaching it is difficult to see how a lecture on leadership would then translate into students being able to demonstrate these required leadership skills for clinical practice.

Within the Charles Sturt University Physiotherapy program there is a subject in each year with a problem based learning (PBL) format, where students in small groups work through authentic clinical cases. The tutors take a role of facilitator or coach to nurture skills in the students such as communication, collaboration, the ability to research, their participation and the ability to lead the group through the clinical case. The role of leader is rotated weekly for all students to gain experience and feedback. This is a safe environment for students who are shy or have English as a second language to gain confidence. Traditional models of learning tend to allow the dominant personalities to succeed and the quieter students fade into the background and may also result in a “learnt helplessness” relying on lecturers for all learning. It is important that along with clinical and professional disciple knowledge, students learn how to work in groups and develop skills in leadership and the PBL format meets this requirement.

Example – Student X – was a school captain and captain of the A grade local cricket team – he entered his Physiotherapy course with a high level of confidence. However, within the problem based learning tutorials it was evident that he was not use to seeking other people’s opinions, listening to quieter members and encouraging them to develop their own skills. His idea of leadership was to direct and to ignore those who did not follow his lead. Throughout the first years of his course he came across a lot of problems working within groups. Without the direct feedback from the tutor at the time he would not have developed all the necessary skills and aspects of clinical leadership required upon graduation.