



Physical Anthropology Section – 2007

H68 Introducing Forensic Anthropology to Albania Using the Problem-Based Learning Model

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn the basic concepts of the problem-based learning model and appreciate its efficacy in teaching forensic anthropology, particularly in an international course of relatively short duration in which proactive and cooperative group dynamics are critical components for success.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by raising awareness of the benefits of the problem-based learning model amongst forensic science educators, particularly anthropologists.

This presentation describes the use of the problem-based learning model to teach forensic anthropology in an international field school setting at Butrint National Park in Albania, a country with no history of academic programs in physical anthropology.

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Problem-based learning (PBL) is a method of teaching that uses actual and hypothetical cases, individual research, and group discussion to foster more effective acquisition of skills and knowledge by students than the traditional lecture format. The typical classroom interaction between professors and students is generally static and passive; in contrast, PBL creates a proactive, student-centered learning environment that provides students with extraordinary analytical and problem-solving skills. In use since the 1980s at many medical schools including Harvard, Bowman Gray, McMaster, and Michigan State, PBL is particularly suited for teaching the forensic sciences with their combination of conceptual, analytical, and psychomotor elements. Perhaps without realizing it, forensic anthropologists use the PBL method when they assign their students a skeleton to analyze as part of their osteology and forensic anthropology courses. Yet an extensive review of the forensic science literature reveals few papers that even mention the approach and none associated with forensic anthropology.

PBL creates a dialogue between the process of learning and the content that is required of the discipline's practitioners. Rather than simply providing answers to student questions, in PBL the professor identifies the relevant learning issues associated with the case, facilitates student research using textbooks, online sources, and interviews with appropriate experts; and guides the student group discussions. Students actively contribute to and share in their own learning process, initially by defining additional learning objectives and then by collecting appropriate information and critically evaluating their own performance and that of their peers. This collaborative process provides immediate feedback both within and outside of the group discussions, encouraging and reinforcing positive behavior and interpersonal communication. Faculty and students who participate in PBL-based programs report higher levels of satisfaction with their educational experience and more effective performance in clinical and other "real-life" settings that require analytical thinking and problem solving after graduation.

Both PBL and physical anthropology are foreign to Albania, a country isolated from the rest of the western world from 1946 until its democratic revolution in 1991. Albania has produced only one physical anthropologist – Dr. Aleksandër Dhima – who received his graduate education in China. At present, no Albanian university offers any courses in physical anthropology.

Since 2004, Utica College has offered a four-week, six-credit forensic anthropology field school at Butrint National Park in southwestern Albania. Butrint is a UNESCO World Heritage Site with a 3,000-year history of occupation by numerous peoples, flourishing under the Greek and Romans and again during the medieval period. Using human remains excavated at the site, participants in the field school learn the basics of forensic anthropology while immersed in a culturally stimulating environment. PBL exercises include sorting commingled remains, determining demographic profiles for each individual, identifying evidence of disease, trauma, and activity-related biomechanical stress, and reporting results in a concise, professional manner. Over the past three summers, 33 students from eight different American and Canadian colleges have participated in the course, together with six Albanians. Dr. Dhima collaborated as a consultant and professor for the course in 2004 and 2005.

PBL is especially effective for teaching this course, with its emphasis on group process and case-based discussions. This approach promotes cooperative interactions among the course's American and Albanian students, quickly bridging the language barriers and cultural gaps that initially exist. While



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those field school students with some previous training in osteology and forensic anthropological methods benefit the most from the PBL exercises used in the course, novices more quickly grasp the basic content of the field and are prepared for further independent investigation after the course ends.

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