Defining Characteristics of Problem Based Learning

WHAT?	HOW?	WHY?
Student-centered & Experimental	Select authentic assignments from the discipline, preferably those that would be relevant and meaningful to student interests. Students are also responsible for locating and evaluating various resources in the field.	Relevance is one of the primary student motivators to be a more self-directed learner.
Inductive	Introduce content through the process of problem solving, rather than problem solving after introduction to content.	Research indicates that "deeper" learning takes place when information is introduced within a meaningful context.
Builds on/Challenges Prior Learning	If the case has some relevance to students, then they are required to call on what they already know or think they know. By focusing on their prior learning, students can test assumptions, prior learning strategies, and facts.	The literature suggests that learning takes place when there is a conflict between learning and new information.
Context-specific	Choose real or contrived cases and ground the count in the kinds of challenges faced by practitioners in the field.	Again, students tend to learn context specific information at a deeper level and retain longer.
Problems are Complex & Ambiguous, and Require Meta-cognition	Select actual examples from the "real life" of the discipline that have no simple answers. Require students to analyze their own problem-solving strategies.	Requires the ability to use higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation of new knowledge.
Create Cognitive Conflict	Select cases with information that makes simple solutions difficult; while the solution may address one part of the problem, it may create another problem. Challenges prior learning as noted above.	The literature suggests that learning takes place when there is a conflict between prior learning and new information.
Collaborative & Interdependent	Have students work in small groups in order to address the presented case.	By collaborating, students see other kinds of problem-solving strategies, discuss the case using their collective information, and take responsibility for their own learning, as well as their classmates'.