Introducing forensic science case-based learning: As straightforward as it seems?

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Our belief is that if we encourage students to engage in novel, carefully crafted learning activities anchored in professional practice we would be better preparing them for their future careers. To this end we introduced problem-based learning into our core first year class, Principles of Forensic Investigation, two years ago.

The context of the class was the analysis of biological and chemical materials recovered from a fictitious crime scene. The students were divided into groups of four for the laboratories where each group of students undertook the same laboratory exercises but obtained different outcomes, lending an element of problem solving unique to each group.

Instructions were provided about how to handle the evidence and the laboratory work was heavily supplemented with both lecture and tutorial classes.

Over a period of three years, students undertaking this first year course have been asked to complete questionnaires about the course; what they learnt from it, whether they enjoyed this style of teaching, how complicated they found the laboratory classes. The results of these questionnaires will be discussed in some detail and will show that, despite forensic science being a practical discipline, some students are not as comfortable with case-based learning as one might expect.