

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

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Editors' Reflection

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In Memoriam: John R. Savery (1950–2025) Editors' Reflection

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It is with profound sadness that the editors of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning* (IJPBL) mark the passing of John R. Savery, Ph.D., on May 8, 2025. John's relationship with this journal was foundational—he contributed the most-read article in IJPBL's history and, in doing so, helped introduce an entire generation of educators and researchers to the principles of problem-based learning. In the remarks that follow, three members of the editorial community offer their reflections on Savery's scholarship, his generosity, and the lasting imprint he leaves on the field.

Krista Glazewski, The Friday Institute, North Carolina State University

John earned his doctorate in Instructional Systems Technology from Indiana University Bloomington, and it was there, alongside Thomas M. Duffy, that he developed the scholarly perspective that would define his career. Their 1995 chapter, "Problem-Based Learning: An Instructional Model and Its Constructivist Framework," offered something the field needed: a rigorous, theoretically grounded account of why PBL works, not merely how it is implemented.

Drawing on constructivist philosophy and the proposition that understanding is built through purposeful interaction and negotiated through sociocultural learning, Savery and Duffy articulated instructional principles that distinguished authentic PBL from the many approaches that borrowed its vocabulary but did not commit to the theory. That piece became one of the most cited works in the PBL literature, and it remains a touchstone for anyone seeking to understand the difference between learning through problems and learning about them.

His 2006 overview in this journal extended that theoretical project by clarifying boundaries. John took seriously the risk that PBL's popularity would dilute its meaning, and he responded with careful conceptual work. This article distinguished PBL from case-based learning, project-based learning, and inquiry-based learning in ways that illuminated each approach rather than diminishing any of them. He was equally candid about the gaps in research, noting that enthusiasm for PBL outpaced the evidence base and calling for more rigorously designed studies. That combination of intellectual honesty and genuine advocacy for learner-centered practice was characteristic of how John operated as a scholar.

What distinguished John's contributions was a commitment to bridging theory and practice, not as a rhetorical gesture, but as an organizing principle. He understood that constructivism without instructional enactment was philosophy, and instruction without theoretical grounding was craft; what he sought and informed was the territory in between. At the University of Akron, where he served as Professor and Director of Instructional Services, he brought that same integrative approach to faculty development and classroom technology, working to ensure that instructional design decisions were anchored in how people actually learn.

John is survived by his wife Carol, his sons Eden and Dylan, and his grandchildren. He is also survived by a body of work that continues to shape how educators think about the relationship between problems, learning, and the conditions that make both meaningful. The closing lines of his 2006 essay captured his orientation toward the work: "In my opinion, it is vitally important that current and future generations of students experience a problem-based learning approach and engage in constructive solution-seeking activities." This statement represents the conviction of someone who believed, deeply and demonstrably, that the design of learning environments is a moral as well as intellectual undertaking.

Xun Ge, University of North Texas

The field of problem-based learning lost an influential scholar with the passing of John R. Savery in May 2025. His article, "Overview of Problem-based Learning: Definitions and Distinctions," published in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning* in 2006, remains one of the most widely read and cited works on PBL. According to the journal, it has been downloaded more than 184,000 times and cited over 6,403 times on Google Scholar, reflecting its lasting influence.

In this article, Savery provided a clear and accessible explanation of problem-based learning as a learner-centered, constructivist approach. He also offered a concise historical overview of PBL, helping readers understand its origins and evolution. A key contribution is his careful distinction between problem-based learning and related approaches, such as project-based learning, case-based learning, and inquiry-based learning. By clarifying PBL's core concepts, principles, and defining characteristics, the article helped readers grasp its essence and unique features of the PBL pedagogy. In doing so, Savery's work advanced and spread PBL implementation across diverse educational contexts, and for many, it has become a reliable, concise reference for the key concepts and principles of PBL.

One of Savery's greatest strengths was translating theory into practical guidance. His writing helped readers understand not only the philosophy behind PBL but also its pedagogy and implementation. For this reason, the article has frequently served as an introductory reading for those

new to PBL. I have personally included this article as a “must-read” overview of PBL for my graduate students who wish to learn about and apply PBL principles.

John Savery’s scholarship continues to shape how educators design PBL environments that foster inquiry, collaboration, self-directed learning, and authentic problem solving. His work has guided and inspired many in advancing both PBL practice and research. His legacy lives on through educators and researchers who draw upon his insights and through the ongoing impact of PBL in classrooms worldwide. His clarity of thought and commitment to student-centered constructivist learning will continue to inspire those seeking to create meaningful learning experiences and make a lasting influence in education.

Peggy A. Ertmer, Purdue University

John Savery is a name with which nearly every PBL teacher and researcher is familiar. Both his co-authored article with Tom Duffy that first appeared in Brent Wilson’s edited book (*Constructivist Learning Environments: Case Studies in Instructional Design*) and his article in the first issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-based Learning* (IJPBL) introduced thousands to this student-centered instructional approach. In terms that PBL novices could readily grasp, John helped countless folks take their first steps toward understanding, implementing, and researching the tenets of PBL.

Although I never met John, I was aware of his article with Tom Duffy when Alex Macklin and I began planning the launch of IJPBL in 2006. I asked John to submit an article for the inaugural issue that would introduce new readers to PBL. What resulted was “An Overview of Problem-based Learning: Definitions and Distinctions,” the most downloaded article the journal has had. To date, John’s article has been downloaded nearly 185,000 times. It is unlikely that any other article will ever surpass this number as the 2nd most popular article has had only 57,000 downloads. Although John’s scholarship goes beyond this one article, I am convinced that this single article has cemented his legacy and will continue to influence many future generations of PBL scholars and teachers.

Woei Hung, University of North Dakota

John Savery, a name cited in thousands of PBL papers, inspired countless educational researchers to explore, study, experiment, and transform one of the most studied instructional methods in education. I was one of them. Twenty-five years ago, when I was still a doctoral student, a professor recommended a book *Constructivist Learning Environments: Case Studies in Instructional Design* edited by Brent Wilson. One of the chapters caught my eye and that was “Problem-based Learning” authored by John Savery and Tom Duffy. That was the first time I had read about PBL. Coming from a cognitivist background by training, I was struck by the idea of constructivism and the unique instructional principles and practices of PBL. At that time, the idea of PBL was so unconventional, yet felt so right to me. I became a firm believer of PBL then and started my PBL research journey.

A couple of years later, I graduated and started my professoriate career. Based on my study of PBL and enthusiasm for this instructional method, I created the 3C3R PBL Problem Design model and presented it at the 2005 AERA annual meeting. John Savery was the discussant for that session. He did not know me and that was the first time I met him in person. I was of course extremely nervous about what Dr. Savery thought of my work. When he got to my paper during his discussions, the first thing he said to me was “you need to publish this paper.” I was so surprised and ecstatic that John Savery liked my work! A validation from John Savery! As a young and unknown researcher, that was

such an unbelievable experience and honor. With his encouragement, this paper was eventually published in the inauguration issue of IJPBL. It was then that I joined the PBL research professional community. Since then, our collegial friendship has continued through conferences and publications to exchanging jokes at dinners. He was a mentor and colleague I am grateful to have and will remember forever.

John, you made a difference in this life.

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