

## **Challenge based learning in third level education: A literature review**

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### **Highlights**

- No previous review of Challenge Based Learning literature has been conducted
- CBL describes a wide array of different educational interventions and approaches
- Although benefits of CBL are reported, institutional and academic challenges remain
- Eight common characteristics of CBL emerged from the review
- Best practice strategies to support third level adoption of CBL are needed

## Abstract

The application of Challenge Based Learning has increased in third level institutions, fostering student transversal competencies, knowledge of sociotechnical problems, and collaboration with industry and community actors. However, a broad range of different frameworks, hybrid approaches, and educational interventions are using this term to define their approach. This lack of standardization creates definitional and conceptual challenges for the domain. A review of CBL literature was conducted to examine key characteristics, challenges and benefits, and educational factors. A total of 100 articles were reviewed using a qualitative thematic matrix. Results describe how benefits of Challenge Based Learning are reported despite many institutional, practical and academic challenges remaining. Although there was much variability in CBL approaches, eight common characteristics of CBL emerged from the literature. This research can support future research and implementation of CBL by providing guiding characteristics and a preliminary classification of CBL approaches.

## 1. Introduction

Challenge-based learning (CBL) is a growing approach in third level education and has been promoted as a means for students to align the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge with the development of transversal competencies while working on authentic and sociotechnical societal problems (Nichols & Cator, 2008; Nichols, Cator, & Torres, 2016). This flexible approach frames learning with challenges using multidisciplinary actors, technology enhanced learning, multi-stakeholder collaboration and an authentic, real-world focus.

While the term CBL has appeared in academic literature since 2001 (Giorgio & Brophy, 2001), publications range from standardized CBL frameworks, hybrid approaches, and general educational interventions using challenges in their design. This mass of different approaches using the same term in different ways creates challenges in its definition and in conceptualizing its research landscape.

This research broadly explores the corpus of existing literature related to CBL in third level education to establish the nature of what is meant by CBL. It will do this by examining the varying definitions of CBL within the literature in order to provide a common understanding of what CBL is and is not. The key characteristics, challenges and benefits of CBL interventions will be synthesised. Furthermore, this research will provide an overview of the current CBL research landscape in order to identify the dominant strands and potential areas for future research. A key contribution, therefore, is a preliminary classification of CBL research to guide future action in this space.

### 1.1. Origins of CBL

“A challenge-based learning experience is a learning experience where the learning takes places through the identification, analysis and design of a solution to a sociotechnical problem. The learning experience is typically multidisciplinary, takes place in an international context and aims to find a collaboratively developed solution, which is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.”(Malmqvist, Rådberg, & Lundqvist, 2015).

The earliest mention of CBL within academic literature described the STAR Legacy Cycle; used primarily at Vanderbilt University. This approach contained six phases; challenge, generate ideas,

multiple perspectives, research and revise, test your mettle, and go public (Birol, McKenna, Smith, Giorgio, & Brophy, 2002) in a project focussed enquiry cycle. Derived from the How People Learn pedagogical framework, it was used for module development to enhance student learning experiences (Birol et al., 2002). Several case studies were published based on this approach within the disciplines of engineering and biotechnology (Barry, Brophy, Oakes, Banks, & Sharvelle, 2008; Lovell & Brophy, 2014).

In 2008, Apple published a report as part of their “Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow – Today” project, describing how they developed a CBL approach by working with American educators. CBL within this context describes a three phased approach to teaching; engage, act and investigate. Through this process, students collaborate with academia, industry and extra-academic actors to solve real world challenges through creative and authentic experiences. From this publication, a wide variety of case studies, hybrid approaches and research literature emerged describing how many third level institutions used CBL to increase student collaboration and engagement (Chanin, Sales, Santos, Pompermaier, & Prikladnicki, 2018), develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Cheng, 2016) and face real world problems in their learning (Cheung, Cohen, Lo, & Elia, 2011). In addition, a variety of other studies using the CBL term were published using more bespoke approaches. Many suggest that CBL was not a completely new approach and emerged via aligned pedagogies (Kohn Rådberg, Lundqvist, Malmqvist, & Hagvall Svensson, 2018).

## 1.2. Aligned pedagogies

CBL is often used interchangeably, or in the same definition, with other similar pedagogies such as project based learning (PjBL) and problem based learning (PBL) (May-Newman & Cornwall, 2012). However, CBL has its own frameworks, definitions, and approaches. Binder, Nichols, Reinehr, and Malucelli (2017) describe how CBL differs from PBL and PjBL with its absence of predefined study, content or challenge. Stakeholders from multiple settings are used in CBL to support students, as opposed to being supported solely by professors or project managers (Garay-Rondero, Rodríguez Calvo, & Salinas-Navarro, 2019), and act as co-researchers and designers, rather than facilitators (Membrillo-Hernández et al., 2018). Unlike PBL and PjBL, CBL has a focus on sustainability issues and demands a verifiable and urgent solution (Garay-Rondero et al., 2019). In addition, the focus is not on the final product, such as in PjBL, but the process is viewed as being as important. However, there are some commonalities between CBL, PBL and PjBL; its use of a problem or challenge such as PBL, and its use of a project such as PjBL. Nonetheless, in the same way that PBL and PjBL differ (Dobber, Zwart, Tanis, & van Oers, 2017), CBL should be understood as an approach of its own.

At a higher conceptual level, active learning is noted as being an overarching approach used by CBL (Hernández-de-Menéndez, Vallejo Guevara, Tudón Martínez, Hernández Alcántara, & Morales-Menendez, 2019; Kalinga, Ibwe, Mvungi, & Tenhunen, 2018; Membrillo-Hernández, J. Ramírez-Cadena, et al., 2019; Suwono, Saefi, & Susilo, 2019); however, the term experiential learning (Chanin et al., 2018; Detoni, Sales, Chanin, Villwock, & Santos, 2019; Gama, 2019) and inquiry learning (Martin, Rivale, & Diller, 2007) are also used in a similar manner. These approaches are now being used in third level institutions seeking to move to a more student-led means of teaching and learning.

## 1.3. CBL in third level institutions

The broad defining features of CBL strongly align with the strategic goals and policies of many third level institutions. Transversal skills and competencies, such as collaboration and innovation, are commonly integrated into institutional policy and curricula to improve student employability and

post-university life. The acquisition of such skills requires a different means of teaching students whereby they actively develop these skills rather than focusing on strict disciplinary learning objectives. Student-led approaches, such as CBL, can support this type of skill development and have been identified in third level policy and strategy as key to institutional reform, student progression, and mobility (Gaebel, Zhang, Bunescu, & Stoeber, 2018).

Industry and community collaboration are also identified by institutions in strategic goals and research funding applications. Improving the link between academia and industry is crucial for the advancement of knowledge, innovation in design and development, and providing solutions to transdisciplinary societal problems (Trinity College Dublin, 2020). Sustainability and the SDGs are also mentioned in many institutional policies and align with all university disciplines (Franco et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2015).

CBL, at its most broad understanding, ties into all these factors, however, it is a very different approach compared to traditional pedagogical approaches common to many institutions. Understanding how CBL is being employed in third level institutions, at what curriculum level, and how it is assessed, is crucial to the long-term applicability and adoption of this approach.

To date, no review has been conducted on the use of challenge based learning in third level institutions within the peer reviewed literature. The definition and research landscape of CBL is therefore vaguely defined despite the rapid increase of its use and interest among third level institutions. There is a real and pressing need to review the existing knowledge in order to clarify its definition, outline the key characteristics of the pedagogy in action, and identify the emerging research themes and areas for future research.

## 2. Methodology

The term 'challenge based learning' was searched for in the article title, abstract and keywords on Scopus and Web of Science between 1900 and December 2019, and an initial 168 articles were returned. The inclusion criteria for literature was:

- Inclusion of 'challenge based learning' within the text;
- Higher education focussed (e.g. universities, third level institutes);
- English language articles;
- Full papers only (i.e. grey literature and literature where abstracts were only available were not included).

A content analysis of the identified literature was conducted. The analysis was structured using a thematic matrix which consisted of a priori themes (such as CBL definition, research methodology) and others emerged through the process of analysis as being of importance to the aim of understanding the CBL research landscape (such as instructors, and assessment). The matrix was created in Microsoft Excel and EndNote was used to maintain a literature repository, and as a means for searching through full text versions of the literature.

The initial set of 168 articles was reviewed and 73 were removed having been out of inclusion criteria scope. An additional 5 peer-reviewed emerged that were omitted by the two primary catalogues but were deemed within scope as peer reviewed literature.

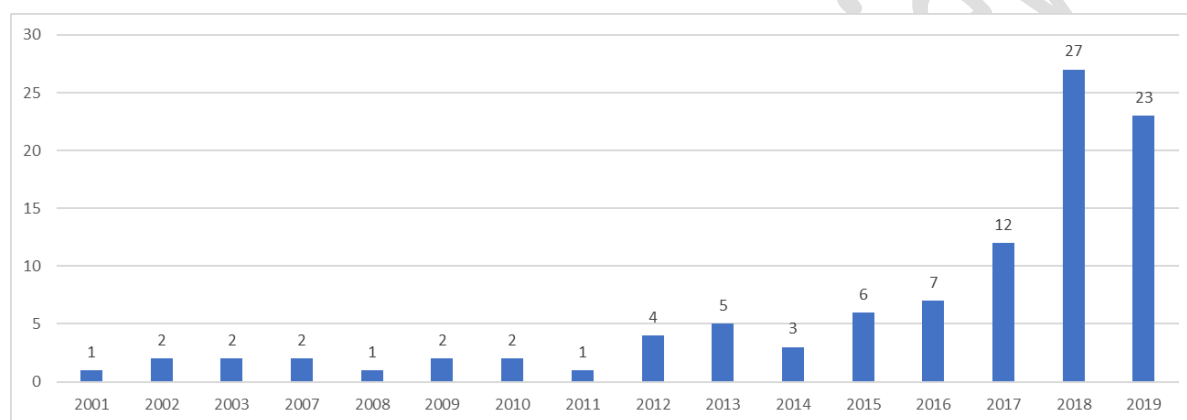
The final set of 100 papers were then reviewed. Text was selected from the literature that related to these themes and entered into the matrix to provide a structured overview of the body of literature. Finally, the data from within the themes was then reviewed and analysed.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Review scope and publication type

A total of 100 publications were reviewed for this research and most publications identified were conference papers or proceedings (n=65), with lesser numbers of peer-reviewed journal articles (n=33) or peer reviewed book chapters (n=2). The first instance of CBL was recorded in 2001, and publication outputs remained low until 2017 where a large growth in publications appeared (Scopus, 2019). Literature published was located within a relatively narrow range of disciplines with engineering, computing (including software engineering), and educational specific publications within those disciplines, being most common. Non-STEM publications were relatively absent from the analysis.

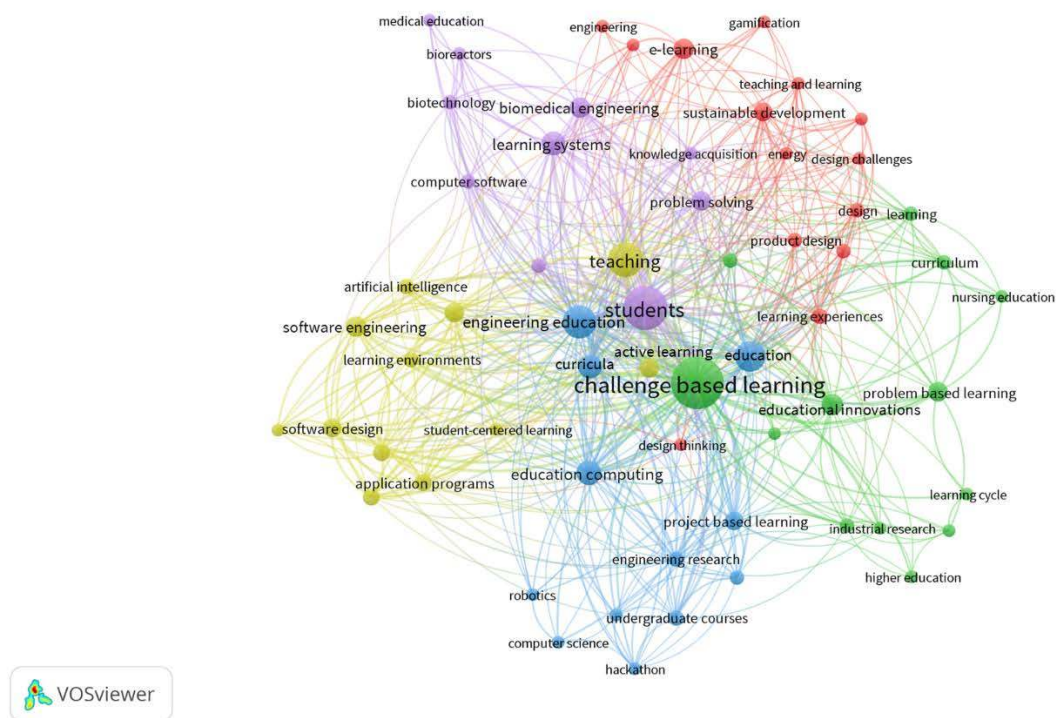
**Figure 1 Description of CBL publications by year**



#### 3.2. Keywords used

Exploring the keywords used within the literature can give a sense of what key topics are being investigated, and what disciplines are using CBL. The keywords used for each paper were analysed using Vosviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010) to visualize the networks between common keywords used. The relatedness of keywords was analysed using co-occurrence analysis which visualized the number of documents in which the keywords were used together.

**Figure 2 Vosviewer visualisation of keywords within reviewed literature.**



The most prominent keywords that emerged included, students ( $n=48$ ), teaching ( $n=28$ ), engineering education ( $n=25$ ), education ( $n=22$ ), education computing ( $n=13$ ), curricula ( $n=12$ ), learning systems ( $n=12$ ) and educational innovations ( $n=10$ ). It is apparent from the visualization that CBL research has had a focus in the engineering and computing disciplines. Five areas of co-occurrence were visualized which grouped literature into disciplinary areas linked with different pedagogical approaches. Engineering and computing education tended to be linked with project based learning, whereas software design was linked with student centred learning. Design thinking was linked to sustainability, whereas biomedical sciences were linked with learning systems. Experiential learning was linked to professional competencies and nursing education.

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates the variety of pedagogical approaches used in conjunction with CBL and conversely, the lack of breadth of disciplinary applications of CBL learning experiences within the literature.

### 3.3. Research methodologies

The most common methodology employed in the surveyed literature was a descriptive case study, followed by quantitative, mixed method, qualitative and literature review. Descriptive case studies ( $n=39$ ) generally described how a CBL project was implemented or designed (Siqueira da Silva, 2018). Quantitative methodologies ( $n=28$ ) included surveys (Williams, Klein-Gardner, Limberis, & Sullivan, 2012), analysis of student performance scores (Giorgio, Brophy, Birol, McKenna, & Smith, 2002), student learning gain scores (Membrillo-Hernández, J. Ramírez-Cadena, et al., 2019), student transaction data (Ifenthaler, Gibson, & Zheng, 2018), and social network analysis (Dornfeld Tissenbaum & Jona, 2018). Mixed methodologies ( $n=26$ ) were most commonly a quantitative survey augmented with qualitative analysis of observations (Gama, 2019), open ended questions (Guo, Zhang, Ritter, & Man, 2014) or more specific methods such as video analysis (Eraña-Rojas, López Cabrera, Ríos Barrientos, & Membrillo-Hernández, 2019). Qualitative methods ( $n=4$ ) including

interviewing students or teachers and employing thematic analysis on the data (Cruger, 2018). Three studies used a literature review for their research.

**Table 1 Methodologies used in CBL research reviewed**

Methodology	Number of studies
Descriptive case study	39
Quantitative	28
Mixed method	26
Qualitative	4
Literature review	3

This finding describes how CBL research is in a nascent state and could benefit by more rigorous methodological approaches.

The focus within the methodological spread is understandable for a field of research that is in its infancy. The dominant use of case studies, with their focus on description of the experience within the specific context of the implementation and their lack of generalisability, reflects experimentation within authentic learning contexts. However, explanatory or predictive knowledge from these predominant methodologies is lacking and could fail to provide conceptual or theoretical perspectives of CBL.

### 3.4. Common CBL approaches

Two common CBL approaches emerged within the literature reviewed; Apple CBL and STAR Legacy Cycle/HPL. These were identified through the text and references section of the literature where authors referenced these approaches as being a guiding structure for their research. Although, in many cases hybrid approaches were used (see section 3.6.5 below), the basis of many of the papers was founded on these two frameworks. In addition, some literature referred to CBL, but did not explicitly reference CBL frameworks or literature (Gray & Schwartz, 2017). It is worth noting that some third level institutions created a hybrid model mentioning both Apple and STAR approaches.

**Table 2 Literature that used defined frameworks in some form**

Framework	Number of articles
Apple CBL and hybrid versions	64
STAR Legacy Cycle and hybrid versions	24
Undefined or no framework	13
Other (e.g. DCBL, Challenge Based Learning Cycle)	9

Having explored the scope, methodology and frameworks used, clarity in the definition of CBL was identified as a key output for this literature review.

### 3.5. Key features and definitions of CBL

At the onset, it is important to note the trichotomy between research using CBL original approaches, CBL approaches derived from previous approaches (hybrid) and literature using the term CBL to describe an educational project that uses challenges within its design. Although CBL is designed to be a flexible approach, many projects do not explicitly refer to CBL as an approach but use the term CBL in describing their research.

At the highest level of definition, CBL has been described in a multitude of ways; as a learning framework (Chanin et al., 2018; A. R. Santos, Sales, Fernandes, & Nichols, 2015), an instructional (Marin, Hargis, & Cavanaugh, 2013), philosophical (Moresi, De Oliveira Braga Filho, Barbosa, & Hatmann, 2018) or multidisciplinary approach (Kalinga et al., 2018; Kohn Rådberg et al., 2018; Nichols & Cator, 2008), a model (Membrillo-Hernández, Muñoz-Soto, et al., 2019), a learning experience (Olivares Olivares, López Cabrera, & Valdez-García, 2018) and, amongst many others, a methodology (Quweider & Khan, 2016). This variation can create difficulties in understanding what exactly CBL is at a conceptual level. For the purposes of this article, the term 'approach' has been used, given that it is a broad and often used term within the literature.

The following key defining features of CBL emerged from the literature; global themes, real world challenges, collaboration, technology, flexibility, multi-disciplinarity and discipline specificity, creativity and innovation, and challenge definition.

### **3.5.1. Global themes**

The first defining feature of CBL emerging from the literature, is that the thematic content areas predominantly addressed in a CBL approach are rooted in themes of global importance, such as sustainability, or war (de la O Campos, 2019; Fidalgo-Blanco, Sein-Echaluce, & García-Peñalvo, 2016; Gama, Alencar, Calegario, Neves, & Alessio, 2019; L. F. Johnson, Smith, Smythe, & Varon, 2009; Marin et al., 2013; Ossiannilsson & Ioannides, 2017). Themes of global importance respond to the need for students to have skills in a global environment, a global mindset (Sternad, 2015), knowledge of global problems, and the ability to face global issues themselves (Suwono et al., 2019). Solutions to global issues should have a local focus (Binder et al., 2017) and applicability (Gama, Alencar, et al., 2019).

However, challenges of this type can be removed from the specificities of academic subjects (Conde, García-Peñalvo, Fidalgo-Blanco, & Sein-Echaluce, 2017) and are, in some cases, gently guided to course themes (Gaskins, Johnson, Maltbie, & Kukreti, 2015). The terms sustainability, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also commonly used in many CBL studies both as a competency (Bordonau, Olivella, & Velo, 2017) and as a theme used in the design of the challenges (Gibson, Irving, & Scott, 2019; Martinez & Crusat, 2017).

### **3.5.2. Real world challenges**

A second defining feature of CBL is using and validating real world challenges; for example "Increase the knowledge of adolescents towards type 2 diabetes mellitus." (Cheng, 2016, p. 131). These real world challenges aim to bring students "closer to the real world" (Conde et al., 2017, p. 252) and increase motivation and engagement (Gaskins et al., 2015) by having an impact on their own lives (L. F. Johnson et al., 2009). Real world challenges can be discipline specific (e.g. engineering) (Rowe & Klein, 2007) and many projects are assessed and validated in the 'real world' by presenting their results to the wider community (Díaz Martínez, 2019). In addition to the challenges being 'real world', associated competencies such as communication are deemed to be important for 'real world' industry participation (Hernández-de-Menéndez et al., 2019). However, difficulties mimicking real world scenarios in a classroom were noted by some studies (Detoni et al., 2019).

### **3.5.3. Collaboration between students, academic and extra-academic actors**

Collaboration was identified as a key competency in many of the studies and was at the forefront of both the design of the educational intervention and as a means for solutions to be developed. Students, educators and extra-academic actors (e.g. industry partners, community members)



collaborate in most CBL case studies (A. R. Santos et al., 2015). This collaboration can be students working with other students in groups or teams (Da Costa et al., 2018); students, academics and industry partners collaborating to find solutions to a challenge (Bordonau et al., 2017; Díaz Martínez, 2019; Membrillo-Hernández, J. Ramírez-Cadena, et al., 2019) and provide student feedback (Félix-Herrán, Rendon-Nava, & Nieto Jalil, 2019); and students collaborating with community members to define challenges, and identify, develop and present solutions (Cruger, 2018; Gibson, Irving, et al., 2019; Malmqvist et al., 2015; Maya, Garcia, Britton, & Acuña, 2017).

The literature reported that student collaboration with academic and extra-academic actors deepened student knowledge, (Barth & Luft, 2012; Serrano, Molina, Manrique, & Bajo, 2018), motivated and engaged students (Morales-Menendez, Cantú Ortiz, Ramirez, Fangmeyer, & De Menendez, 2019), and supported industry-specific training (Mora-Salinas, Torres, Castillo, Gijón, & Rodriguez-Paz, 2019). Although there were many examples of literature in which extra-academic actors were used in CBL projects, there was little detail as to what their input was, their perceptions of the CBL approach, and whether their participation was evaluated.

#### **3.5.4. Technology**

Technology is 'infused' within the lifecycles of CBL projects (Gaskins et al., 2015, p. 35; Quweider & Khan, 2016), and is a recurring theme within the literature. For CBL students, technology supported communication with project stakeholders, engagement with the public, accessing and researching information, publishing outcomes, collaborative workspaces, computational applications and tools, and accessing module content through a VLE (Conde et al., 2017; Cruger, 2018; Fidalgo-Blanco et al., 2016; Gibson, Irving, et al., 2019; Lam, 2016). For educators, technology tracked student interactions, evaluated student performance, provided a collaborative space for sharing course materials, and helped identify issues with student engagement and instructional design (Fidalgo-Blanco et al., 2016; Gibson, Irving, et al., 2019; Nelson & Chesler, 2009).

Case studies describe various bespoke online platforms for communication, process implementation, self-direction, time management, scalability, and student engagement (Gibson, Scott, & Irving, 2019). Virtual learning environments such as Moodle or Blackboard are used to host module resources (Díaz Martínez, 2019; Lovell & Brophy, 2014; Nelson & Chesler, 2009), assignments (May-Newman & Cornwall, 2012), online communication (Fidalgo-Blanco et al., 2016), and to track student activity data (Conde et al., 2017).

In many cases, technology used in the daily life of students is employed for the CBL approach (Conde et al., 2017; L. F. Johnson et al., 2009). Online communication applications used to facilitate communication and project management such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype and Google Drive (Cheng, 2016; Díaz Martínez, 2019; Hernández-de-Menéndez et al., 2019) were commonly used. Social media was mentioned as being important for student societal contributions and for organizing and disseminating information (Cruger, 2018; Kuswadi & Nuh, 2017). Gibson, Irving, et al. (2019) also note that technology options are open and flexible, and not confined to a particular process. Technology provides options for students who can be creative in developing solutions.

#### **3.5.5. Flexibility**

Although structured approaches (e.g. Nichols et al. (2016) and Giorgio and Brophy (2001)) were often described within the literature, flexible adaptation of CBL approaches was very common. For example, experiential learning, competency based learning and CBL (Garay-Rondero et al., 2019), research based learning and CBL (Morales-Menendez et al., 2019), CBL and design thinking (Gama, Alencar, et al., 2019; Gama, Castor, et al., 2019), CBL and competency based education (Félix-Herrán

et al., 2019), CBL and challenge based instruction (Fidalgo-Blanco et al., 2016), design challenge based learning (DCBL) (Blevis, 2010), CBL and feedback (CFL) (Sternad, 2015), CBL, flipped classroom, and case based learning (Hartono, Kosala, Supangkat, & Ranti, 2018), CBL and agile practices (A. Santos, Sales, Fernandes, & Kroll, 2018), CBL and problem based learning (Barry et al., 2008) and CBL and game design thinking (Siqueira da Silva, 2018). This suggests that CBL is used as a flexible methodological approach open to interpretation, augmentation and innovation.

### **3.5.6. Multidisciplinary and discipline specificity**

While CBL proposes a multidisciplinary approach in its execution, most of the literature explored case studies within single disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Multidisciplinary is conceived in many cases as using professional competencies that support academic curricula, rather than a stricter multidisciplinary approach across different disciplines. The STEM field was seen as particularly suitable for CBL, as STEM curricula can be “complex, real-world and multi-disciplinary” (Quweider & Khan, 2016). As technology itself is a key part of CBL, technology rich learning environments lend themselves well to this discipline (L. Johnson & Brown, 2011).

Within STEM, common disciplines that utilised CBL included mobile application education (Chanin et al., 2018), civil, biotechnology, software, mechanical and introductory engineering (Chanin et al., 2018; Membrillo-Hernández, Muñoz-Soto, et al., 2019; Rowe & Klein, 2007), and computer science (Barth & Luft, 2012). Within non-STEM disciplines there were much fewer examples of CBL case studies or analyses; for example communication studies (Cruger, 2018), English language (Marin et al., 2013), international business (Sternad, 2015), and marketing (Valenzuela et al., 2018).

Multidisciplinary approaches within the literature, though few, included students from medicine, law and marketing (Eraña-Rojas et al., 2019)

### **3.5.7. Innovation and creativity**

Many CBL case studies used innovation and creativity either as module descriptors (Díaz Martínez, 2019; Yang et al., 2018), as key competencies assessed (e.g. Bordonau et al. (2017)), or as general values within the CBL intervention. Students are encouraged by teachers to use these values to provide challenge solutions. Studies reported increases in student ability to innovate and create through a CBL approach (L. Johnson & Brown, 2011; Yang et al., 2018).

### **3.5.8. Challenge definition**

A key similarity within all CBL literature is the use of a challenge; a broad statement or task as a means of encouraging students to address educational criteria, fulfil competencies and complete learning objectives (Gibson, Irving, et al., 2019). However, within the curriculum design, differences in the definition of challenges emerged in the analysis. In many cases the initial challenge was defined by the educators (Giorgio & Brophy, 2001; Jansen, Brophy, McKenna, Mahadevan-Jansen, & Walsh Jr, 2003) whereas in some cases it was defined by the student (Gabriel, 2014). A key demarcation between two of the main approaches (Apple and STAR), is in this definition of challenges; for educators using the Apple approach students would generally determine their challenge, but for the STAR approach the challenge was determined for the students by educators.

## **3.6. CBL educational factors**

### **3.6.1. Curriculum structure**

Few studies had CBL as embedded curriculum practice (Malmqvist et al., 2015), rather CBL was included as a novel pedagogical approach to supplement existing structures. This reinforces the 'flexibility' theme above whereby CBL was commonly used with a broad range of pedagogical approaches. Many studies described how their case study was developed as a pilot (Guo et al., 2014), as a forthcoming educational intervention (Kerber, Holz, Thüs, & Schroeder, 2013), or was at an initial implementation phase to be included in future strategy (Maya et al., 2017). However, other studies noted how positive results from their initial project caused CBL to be expanded to other courses within the university (Quweider & Khan, 2016), how CBL is now integrated into core curricula (Valenzuela et al., 2018) or has been used for multiple cohorts of students (Morales-Menendez et al., 2019). CBL was used in both short term (i.e. in a single day or week) (Gama, 2019) and long-term curricula (i.e. over full semesters or across an entire programme) (Chanin et al., 2018).

### **3.6.2. Assessment**

Both formative and summative assessment were used within CBL approaches, including workshop attendance and participation (Malmqvist et al., 2015), oral presentations (Díaz Martínez, 2019), peer evaluations (Gabriel, 2014), conference paper reports (Hernández-de-Menéndez et al., 2019), exams (Gaskins et al., 2015), laboratory reports (Mora-Salinas et al., 2019), open book exams (Da Costa et al., 2018), quizzes (Martin et al., 2007), and progress reports (Membrillo-Hernández, J. Ramírez-Cadena, et al., 2019). CBL research that follows a framework or hybrid framework approach generally use both summative and formative assessments. However, CBL hackathons or competitions generally use only summative assessment (i.e. was the project effective). Both individual and team involvement was often assessed, and summative assessment also took into account communication with extra-academic actors; Conde et al. (2017) describe difficulties in measuring communication and developed an ad hoc tool to measure online activity.

Assessment rubrics were often used to assess student performance (Díaz Martínez, 2019; Vargis & Mahadevan-Jansen, 2010), and were usually linked to overall learning objectives, competencies of the module (e.g. innovation (Flores, Montoya, & Mena, 2016)), or assessing a CBL output (e.g. oral presentation (Gabriel, 2014)). These rubrics were, in most cases, developed by the academic team rather than collaboratively with students (Félix-Herrán et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2018). In some cases, existing rubrics such as the Research Skills Development Framework (RSD) were used for assessment (Hernández-de-Menéndez et al., 2019).

### **3.6.3. Challenge-based competitions and hackathons**

Within the literature there were some examples of competitions or hackathons described with the term CBL as a keyword or an article headline. These examples did not always follow a strict CBL approach, and tended to describe how challenges were used within a competitive environment for learning (Gama, 2019; Gama, Alencar, et al., 2019; Gama, Gonçalves, & Alessio, 2018; Hitchcock, 2017; Rakos et al., 2017). One example did follow the Apple framework, and as part of student learning application, entered into a competition following CBL derived education (Cheung et al., 2011). These competitions were assessed in terms of project presentation, technical applicability, potential impact, innovation, and likelihood of impact, among others (Malmqvist et al., 2015).

## **3.7. Challenges with implementing CBL**

Challenges faced with implementing CBL included a high level of uncertainty emerging from the challenges (Membrillo-Hernández, J. Ramírez-Cadena, et al., 2019), the need for flexibility when working with industry partners (Mora-Salinas et al., 2019), educator resistance to technology or non-

traditional ways of teaching (Félix-Herrán et al., 2019; Lam, 2016; Lin & Chen, 2018), additional time needed by academics for evaluation (Díaz Martínez, 2019) and students for working on the challenge (Detoni et al., 2019), difficulties related to the generalizability of the curriculum design (Yang et al., 2018), the need for student support during the transition to CBL teaching (Dornfeld Tissenbaum & Jona, 2018), a lack of student technical skills (Binder et al., 2017), a need for additional technical resources, a lack of hierarchy causing student demotivation (Cheung et al., 2011), third level students being accustomed to traditional forms of learning (L. Johnson & Brown, 2011), accommodating multidisciplinary student groups, and decreased ability to offer subject specific feedback (Malmqvist et al., 2015). Some literature noted the importance of discussing CBL at a policy level within universities such as setting up a steering group (Lin & Chen, 2018) to mitigate for some of these challenges.

### **3.8. Benefits of CBL**

The benefits of CBL were commonly reported in the literature by analysing student or academic feedback, or through a descriptive approach. Benefits for students included industry networking, improving technical skills, application of skills in a real world environment, training in multidisciplinary teamwork, improving problem solving skills, and achieving a deeper understanding of knowledge (Cheung et al., 2011; Conde et al., 2017; Gama, Alencar, et al., 2019; Kohn Rådberg et al., 2018). In addition, students improving their innovative thinking ability and skills was also commonly cited (Lin & Chen, 2018). For academics and industry, benefits included improving research and innovation partnerships, teaching ability, and commercial products (Membrillo-Hernández, J. Ramírez-Cadena, et al., 2019). There was a much greater focus and research rigor on student benefits than academic and industry benefits.

### **3.9. Framework of CBL Characteristics**

Having explored the key characteristics of CBL within the literature, a framework summarising these characteristics was developed. This framework can be used by practitioners, instructional designers and researchers as a reflective, design or analysis tool for CBL methods. Given the wide variability of CBL approaches, this framework could be used to support CBL implementation and ensure that if CBL is being used, each of these characteristics are embedded, in some way, within the design. Ultimately, this framework may help standardization of CBL, currently lacking within teaching and academia.

**Figure 2 Framework of CBL characteristics**



## 4. Discussion

This literature review has explored the landscape of CBL research, its definition, and its application in third level learning environments. Three key areas for discussion have clearly emerged from this review; an understanding of the common CBL definitional themes, the wide variety of CBL approaches, and the nascent state of CBL research.

Global themes, real world challenges, collaboration, technology, flexibility, multidisciplinary and discipline specificity, challenge definition, and creativity and innovation were the most common emerging themes from exploring CBL research definitions. Although there was variance between CBL practical approaches, these key themes were present in most research reviewed. However, what is notable is the lack of practical implementation of some themes described by the studies, such as multidisciplinary teaching. For example, the majority of CBL projects within third level institutions were delivered to STEM students, even though CBL at its core is a multidisciplinary pedagogy. Using challenge-based teaching in non-STEM third level courses appears to be a significant gap in the research and future should consider exploring multiple disciplines in the design, analysis and evaluation of CBL.

Technology was another emerging theme within the literature however, few research studies explored the impact of technology, or identified technology enabled institutional structures in this space. Developing best practice instructional design models for implementing technology within CBL initiatives is an important area for future research. Given that technology-enabled learning is embedded in most third level institutions, exploring how CBL and TEL can be integrated is key to successful institutional adoption of this approach.

Sustainability and addressing real-world challenges themes were also present in all studies but identifying crossover between CBL curriculum design and institutional adoption of education for sustainability development was absent. Determining whether CBL is integrated with institutional strategies on sustainability, or are seen as novel and bespoke approaches outside of these strategies could be an indicator of the long term viability of CBL.

Although there was much variability in CBL approaches and similarities with other approaches such as Project Based Learning and Problem Based Learning, the use of the term 'challenge' differentiated itself from other approaches. Definitions of CBL within the literature tended to describe key

characteristics, but an actual definition of a challenge was absent. In order to fully demark CBL from other approaches, defining the term 'challenge' is crucial. It is suggested that practitioners consider what a challenge is at the onset of curriculum design and how it differs from a problem or a project proposal.

Most tellingly, the review identified the wide flexibility and variability of CBL approaches. This is a significant contribution as it shows how CBL is not a static approach and can be moulded to fit different disciplines, curricula, institutional strategies, and assessment types. This flexibility paves the way for more innovative hybrid approaches to student led learning, vital for many third level institutions. However, conversely a major difficulty in defining CBL is this wide variety of different approaches using the term CBL. There is a clear dichotomy between the theory driven CBL research and research that uses the term CBL to describe general challenge statements within their design. Should the CBL term only be used for studies that use a CBL approach derived from existing frameworks, or should it be more widely used for any educational intervention using challenge statements? To clarify CBL within the literature three literature classifications within the scope of third level CBL research are proposed; strict, hybrid and general.

**Table 3 Proposed classification of CBL approaches**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Strict CBL	An educational approach using strict application of a CBL framework.
Hybrid CBL	An educational approach using a hybrid version of an existing CBL framework.
General CBL	An educational approach using general challenge statements in its design.

Classifying CBL in this way can help researchers and practitioners make better sense of CBL, and perhaps inform improved development of CBL approaches. For example, an academic using basic challenges in a classroom could be guided to use a more formalized and validated approach.

The results of this research also have implications for higher education institutions. Strategic goals and national level policies often include transversal skill development, engagement with industry, transdisciplinarity, and responding to the SDGs as key principles. CBL definitions within the literature strongly align with these themes, and its use in third level institutions can be a means for addressing and practically implementing these goals and policies. However, challenges identified, such as academic resistance, additional time needed for development, curriculum design and student support need to be considered before implementation. Having identified the challenges emerging from the literature, future research should develop best practice strategies to support institutional adaptation of CBL.

The review also identified how CBL is at an early stage of research development, visible by the large number of descriptive case studies. In the same sense that CBL is seen as an evolution of PBL, there is space for a new phase of CBL to emerge. Presently, most CBL research is small scale, focusing on case studies in universities, and student perceptions. Comparative research, detailed qualitative methodologies, instructor perceptions, industry collaboration, longitudinal studies, university level implementation and policy, and alignment with education of sustainable development strategies are all potential avenues for research. At this stage, CBL remains a novel approach in third level institutions and it remains to be seen whether CBL will become more integrated into university structures or if it will continue to be used in bespoke projects within a traditional framework.

## 5. Limitations

This research omitted other keywords using the term challenge in their title, for example, challenge driven learning. In some cases, these keywords were used in conjunction with CBL but there may have been instances where these terms were used in isolation. The authors decided not to include these terms in order to standardize this analysis and provide a linear narrative to CBL. Future studies could augment this research with these keywords and ascertain whether there are commonalities.

## 6. Conclusion

Reviewing CBL literature has contributed to research in this space by identifying emergent themes, clarifying its definition, and gaps in knowledge for future research. This research can be applied by CBL practitioners to guide their approaches to teaching and learning, future research, and supporting third level institutional adoption of CBL.

## 7. Acknowledgements

Figure 2 was based on a Creative Commons diagram from Showeet.com.

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