Adel Smee, Information Technology teacher in the Business TAFE School, shares her experiences with a problem-based approach.

What was your introduction to problem-based learning (PBL)?
I first became aware of PBL during my studies in the Diploma of Industrial Education and Training. I completed a paper on the topic and liked the concepts involved. One of the most interesting sites I found on PBL was the George Lucas Education Foundation (http://www.edutopia.org) which has some really great examples of turning education into a learning experience.

How have you introduced PBL to your teaching at RMIT?
Our new Diploma and Advanced Diploma of Information Technology at the Business TAFE School include several web competencies that lend themselves to the PBL format. The students are presented with briefs from real-world clients and must interact with them to produce websites suitable for publication on the web.

What are students expected to do within a PBL framework, and how does this differ from a more traditional approach?
The students are expected to communicate through a variety of methods with external clients. This encourages them to consider their output more carefully than if they were just submitting assignments to the teacher. They also have the incentive of knowing that if their work is of a high enough standard it will go live online and can be a great addition to their portfolio of work.

How do you assess your students work within a PBL focus?
The assessment is done in a similar way to normal assignment assessment but with more clarity and freedom. The students are told early on exactly what is expected from them in terms of output, but there are fewer prescriptions on how the output is to be produced. This encourages creativity and self-motivated research, especially among the more eager students.

Has your implementation of PBL had any effect on student engagement?
I believe that it has. Some students are really motivated to engage with the subject matter and explore it on their own in a way I have rarely seen before the introduction of PBL. They can immediately see how hard work will result in a benefit for them. Other students put more effort into even basic projects as they know they will have to present in front of a client and must therefore deliver to a higher standard than they might normally aim for.