

## The Role of Teachers in Project Based Learning

### **Gold Standard PBL: Project Based Teaching Practices**

Adapted from *Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning: A Proven Approach to Rigorous Classroom Instruction*, by John Larmer, John Mergendoller, Suzie Boss (ASCD 2015).



Teachers who make Project Based Learning a regular part of their teaching enjoy their new role, although for some it might take time to adjust from traditional practice. It's fun to get creative when designing a project, instead of just using "off the shelf" curriculum materials. Most teachers like working collaboratively with their colleagues when planning and implementing projects, and interacting with other adults from the community or the wider world. And PBL teachers find it rewarding to work closely alongside students, tackling a real-world challenge or exploring a meaningful question.

When transitioning to PBL, one of the biggest hurdles for many teachers is the need to give up some degree of control over the classroom, and trust in their students. But even though they are more often the "guide on the side" than the "sage on the stage," this most certainly does not mean that teachers don't "teach" in a PBL classroom. Many traditional practices remain, but are reframed in the context of a project.

### **Design & Plan**

Teachers create or adapt a project for their context and students, and plan its implementation from launch to culmination while allowing for some degree of student voice and choice.

### **Align to Standards**

Teachers use standards to plan the project and make sure it addresses key knowledge and understanding from subject areas to be included.

**Build the Culture**

Teachers explicitly and implicitly promote student independence and growth, open-ended inquiry, team spirit, and attention to quality.

**Manage Activities**

Teachers work with students to organize tasks and schedules, set checkpoints and deadlines, find and use resources, create products and make them public.

**Scaffold Student Learning**

Teachers employ a variety of lessons, tools, and instructional strategies to support all students in reaching project goals.

**Assess Student Learning**

Teachers use formative and summative assessments of knowledge, understanding, and success skills, and include self and peer assessment of team and individual work.

**Engage & Coach**

Teachers engage in learning and creating alongside students, and identify when they need skill-building, redirection, encouragement, and celebration.

[http://bie.org/blog/gold\\_standard\\_pbl\\_project\\_based\\_teaching\\_practices](http://bie.org/blog/gold_standard_pbl_project_based_teaching_practices)

### **Communicating the project**

As a complex and extended project, learners and teachers, especially in initial iterations of PBL, will require support in getting to know the overall scope of the project, its aims, sub-aims, required outcomes and deadlines. The website (using a free wordpress.com blog), in place of a learners' or teachers' handbook, provided all the information needed to complete the project. It helped the PBL teaching team to discuss their understanding of the project and also communication with the learners in weekly lessons was facilitated through this site. The first session of these lessons was devoted to information sharing. Depending on the stage of the project this involved setting phase objectives, checking progress, question and answer sessions and delivering relevant input. Teams also reviewed the achievement of previous week's WWPs and created new ones for the coming week.

### **Scaffolding the project**

Scaffolding was provided through the division of the project into sub-phases, each contributing to the overall achievement of the project by allowing learners to have clear, manageable sub-goals and model the real-life process of project completion. The sub-phases additionally allowed for stage-by-stage reflection as the project progressed and helped familiarise learners with reflective activities. Documentation was provided to guide learners through each stage of the project but this was intended to be indicative rather than prescriptive.

Considering how to manage the project on a week-to-week basis is also essential. Although teams are encouraged to work autonomously, they will require input, advice and mentoring. Teachers should be aware of their learners' progress throughout the project and should ensure they have an established method(s) for the ongoing monitoring of progress. We asked each team to produce the WWP, which was shared with the teacher. Additionally, we required each team to choose a web-based platform, which could be accessed by team members and the teacher, to be the repository for the work that had been completed as well as the work that was ongoing.

Bosson & Dean **"Promoting learner development through project based learning"**



## Expect More

A student's commitment to a "drive and thrive" attitude naturally varies, depending on temperament, emotions, time of day, school background, and home life. But even more challenging is the fact that your students most likely have not been trained to perform at their best. School reinforces passive skills, such as listening and paying attention. Your goal, instead, is to teach students to be flexible in their skills (know when *not* to pay attention).

Orienting students to this new expectation takes time, patience, and focus. Be prepared for some groaning and objection. Performance takes more effort and commitment than listening or taking notes. Here are a number of approaches that help:

- **Believe that students want to work harder.** If you think that teaching and learning is an uphill battle, it will be. Shift to trusting that human beings want to learn and are willing to work at it. Your job is to put interesting challenges in your students' path.

**Create a community.** Good teachers develop a sense of community in a classroom. This feeling becomes paramount in PBL. Use the typical tools—icebreakers, games, discussions, and group activities—to build and reaffirm community throughout the year. Institute rituals that reinforce connection, such as I Love You walls, or Circle Time for sharing ideas and observations.

**Establish norms, not rules.** Communities operate under a set of common standards that guide interactions. Rules dictate behavior, while norms help internalize behavior. At the beginning of the year, take a class period or two to build and agree on a set of norms. Post the list and revisit it as necessary.

Markham, T. (2012). *Project based learning: Design and coaching guide—expert tools for innovation and inquiry for k–12 educators*. San Rafael, California: Heart IQ Press.