

For Gold Standard PBL, What Matters Most for Teachers?

What helps students succeed with Project Based Learning? Although a handful of kids are capable of tackling in-depth inquiry on their own ([meet Jack Andraka](#)), most students depend on teachers to guide them through the learning experience. So at the risk of adding another acronym to the pot, I think it's worth focusing on *PBT—Project Based Teaching*.

For more than a decade, I've been interviewing teachers about the deliberate shifts they are making in classroom practice. What motivates teachers to move away from traditional, textbook-and-test-based instruction and adopt PBL? Some say they want an approach that makes more authentic use of digital tools. Others are looking for ways to better prepare students for college, careers, and active citizenship through learning experiences that go deeper than surface-level understanding. And some are concerned about a lack of student engagement. They're looking for strategies to give students more voice in their own education and to increase relevance by connecting learning with the world beyond the classroom.

Here's another factor worth considering: For most of today's teachers—even those just entering the profession—it's unlikely that they experienced PBL as students. That means they have to reimagine what's possible in the classroom. For teachers who have never seen projects in action, let alone design or manage them, implementing PBL the first time can feel like a calculated risk.

In *Reinventing Project-Based Learning: Your Field Guide to Real-World Projects in the Digital Age* ([expanded 2nd edition just released by ISTE](#)), we highlight a number of considerations for teachers who are thinking about giving PBL a try. If you're a teacher contemplating a shift to PBL, you are likely to reconsider:

- **Your learning goals.** Be ready to rethink your expectations for what students will know and do, to include not only significant academic outcomes but also such competencies as collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.
- **The way you engage with students.** Be ready to step off the stage and interact with your students differently. Get comfortable with “messier learning,” with students working more autonomously (and not necessarily all doing the same thing at the same time).
- **Your classroom management style.** Be ready to help students become better at managing their own efforts.
- **The physical arrangement of your class.** Be ready to reconfigure the hardware—desks, computers, and other furnishings—to facilitate teamwork and collaboration.
- **How you think about assessment.** Be ready to re-evaluate what you need to pay attention to throughout the learning process (not just at the end), and adjust your teaching plan based on what you notice.

- **How you think about community resources.** Be ready to link your students to experts and other resources outside the classroom.
- **What you collect.** Be ready to reconsider which artifacts of learning are worth evaluating or using to prompt reflection.
- **How you communicate with parents and colleagues.** Be ready to explain your reasoning for adopting PBL, and encourage parents, peers, and other community members to find ways to support project work. For example, they might provide audience feedback, share their expertise, or help with the logistics of field research.

There's a **solid research base** about the benefits of PBL for students. You may be wondering, is PBL worth the trouble for *teachers*?

The answer is, "Yes, but..." To get comfortable with PBL, most teachers need sustained professional development, regular time for collaboration and peer critique, and administrative support. When those pieces are in place, teachers say they like their work more and enjoy the creative challenge of being the designers of projects. (For example, here's a **statewide study about PBL implementation** that asks about teacher perspective.)

http://bie.org/blog/for_gold_standard_pbl_what_matters_most_for_teachers

PBL as Professional Teacher Development

An equally important feature of PBL, for those involved in designing and implementing the programme, has been the Professional Development opportunities it has presented for teachers. The learners' journey into a new type of learning has paralleled our own experience. For many of us it has been a step into uncharted territories, moving away from prescription and standardisation to trust in individuals, professionalism and celebration of different and alternative ways to succeed. Although we have scaffolded the project to provide an overall roadmap with a destination (learning outcomes), the paths individual teachers and teams have taken to arrive at their destinations has varied, leading to outcomes of a high class.

Teacher choice and teamwork

Choice is a key element of the project and applies equally to teachers as to learners. Teachers were encouraged to facilitate the project in a way that fit their teaching style and the needs of their individual learners in order to meet the overall project and phase outcomes. As the project progressed teachers took more ownership of the project and a team ethic developed, mirroring the learners, in which teachers shared, adapted and contributed materials, tasks, techniques and ideas. As a result of this, the PBL cycle became richer, gained more depth and became more learner-centred.

The role of the teacher in the project

Teachers have important roles to play in the project, even though this is a challenging learner-centred project. The first is to ensure that learners understand the project and to guide them, positively, through the various phases. Teachers should also, particularly in an ELT setting, be open to language learning opportunities as they arise, as well as other project focussed learning opportunities. Monitoring the progress of groups is necessary, ensuring that they are on track and providing formative feedback on an ongoing basis. Additionally, the teacher will guide learners through the process of reflection.

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

Project Based Learning for Teachers

Know the Coach's Roles

The teacher as coach incorporates three roles: coaching, counseling, and mentoring. The roles are slightly different. As you move between them, depending on the students and the circumstances, keep in mind the goals for each role.

- **The coach.** A coach focuses on performance. Your role is to define the task, provide training, measure success, and give feedback on performance. In a PBL project, this means that you will clearly detail the process, allow time for practice and mastery, supply well-defined rubrics and other assessments, and offer timely, in-depth responses. Coaching may be done with teams as well as individuals.
- **The counselor.** The counselor role requires that you differentiate between *skill* and *will*. People of any age can be resistant or difficult; young people can be even more temperamental. The main skill of the counselor is to *listen* and offer feedback *if requested*. Listening leads to coachable moments in which you may be able to train a student. But the counselor knows that performance cannot be forced.
- **The mentor.** The mentor role combines the coach and counselor roles and adds an additional element: advice and direction. But remember that the mentor role cannot be successful unless the counselor role is intact. Without listening, you will not establish the channel of trust necessary for students to actively seek or take your advice.

PBL is an intensive process that offers many opportunities for one-on-one interaction with students. In the course of these interactions, their personalities will surface. Taking on the role of the coach enables you to personalize your instruction and get students working on their own behalf. The ultimate goal is for them to do the work, not you.

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.