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Giving PBL some TLC: Project Based Learning to Promote an Engaged School Community

By Julia Whitten

Sent Sun 03/13/22

While working with my mother, a literacy coach at a center-based school for disabled students in the metro-Atlanta area, I watched many popular educational trends and buzzwords sweep through the school and district. Few movements were as fully championed as Project Based Learning (PBL). Since the early twenty-teens, I have been by her side as we sought to connect our often isolated student population to community groups such as the school board, local veterans and first responders, local ethnic and religious groups, regional theatres, and local businesses through numerous school-wide inquiry projects. These projects would involve the whole school community throughout the process. Through this work, I was driven to explore: what exactly is Project Based Learning and how can it promote an engaged community?

What is Project Based Learning?

In their book *Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning*, authors John Larmer, John Mergendollar, and Suzie Boss describe the development of what they call Gold Standard PBL which establishes the two main student goals of obtaining deep content knowledge and making learning transferable to new contexts and inquiries. They lay out “7 project design elements: (1) a challenging problem or question, (2) sustained inquiry, (3) authenticity, (4) student voice and choice, (5) reflection, (6) critique and revision, and (7) a public product” ([Larmer et al. 2015, p. 37](#)). These elements help an educator to guide students to obtain extensive subject-matter knowledge and the capacity to apply what they’ve learned to new situations and issues.

In connection with inquiry-based learning ([Blessinger & Carfora. 2014, p. 4](#)), many consider Project Based Learning a tool to promote deep learning, using a driving question that is significant to the learners tasked with the inquiry. The question ideally drives sustained student-motivated exploration over time. The investigations “result in artifacts that are concrete and answers the driving question and culminates a learning sequence” ([Miller & Krajcik, 2019](#)). PBL offers a continuum between product-based and experiential-based learning in order for students to feel a sense of ownership over what is being exhibited to the rest of the community, and self-satisfaction over the steps of inquiry that led them there.

How can Project Based Learning be tied to community engagement?

From the initial offering of a challenging problem or question through to the exhibition of a public product, community is a recurring motif in Project Based Learning. In my experience, effective PBL design elements are centered around communal inquiry. Students obtain information from local specialists, and design public products that have a constructive impact on the community. The capacity to enact knowledge in an authentic, sustained inquiry requires a much deeper understanding of the community which the problem is based out of. Student voice and choice is a vital piece in maintaining sustained inquiry and buy-in from students. If you are looking to have students care about a problem enough to design and workshop solutions for it, let it be a real world problem that students can see in their lives outside of the classroom.

Seasoned PBL educator Edward R. Montalvo recently wrote a wonderful article on how PBL can “immerse students in their community” ([Montalvo, 2022](#)). He mentions that implementing design thinking ([Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, 2018](#)) can allow projects to address real problems in the real world by asking students to consider the following concepts when designing a project:

- **Empathy:** *Who are the people involved? What needs do they have?*
- **Define:** *What are the stakes of this problem?*
- **Ideate:** *What capabilities do we have as a school community?*

PBL practitioners are attracted to the novel, since communal interest is fostered around inquiries and solutions that are new. When engaging in PBL, it is important to have students and stakeholders alike realize that not all problems have solutions. We cannot expect a group of student inquirers to “fix” institutional issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and systemic racism. Those are obligations that are shared by everybody living, working, and

learning in the institution. What we can do as PBL educators is to localize the effects of these challenges by strengthening our bonds to our communities?

Project Based Learning in the Arts and Humanities: Activating Community Empathy

Empathy-driven connections are fuel to the creative process. Every day in humanities and arts classrooms, students must be able to empathize with people, comprehend difficulties, and come up with creative solutions. They observe, listen, and explain what they are doing to others, as well as ask questions and reflect on what they perceive ([Hashim et al, 2019, p. 15](#)). The PBL element of authenticity is best demonstrated in these classrooms when students are developing and activating their empathy, definitive, and ideation muscles while they are practicing content application. When Project Based Learning is brought into arts and humanity-based classrooms, learning has a greater purpose, an altruistic one. They reflect personalized learning that better reaches all students. Learning is in a laboratory setting, so any kind of learner can participate in their own way to fit their own learning goals and objectives.

Many practices that arts and humanities educators are already practicing involve the 7 PBL Project Design Elements. Examples of secondary-level projects include:

- Using documentary theatre techniques to create civic action based dialogue in a Theatre for Social Change Class
- Micromuseums about community stories and leaders in a History Class ([Montalvo, 2022](#))
- A digital service learning project that centers connection during the COVID-19 Pandemic in a Leadership Class ([Wegner, 2020](#))
- Creating field-guides to home in English Language Arts and Media Classes ([Sanders & Larmer, 2020](#))

As class registration and curriculum planning for the upcoming school year is in full swing in many secondary schools across the nation, consider how project based learning best supports students enrolled in humanities classes- whether it be theatre, sociology, foreign language, music, history, or English language arts. PBL excites personalized learning, which as secondary educator Andratesha Fitzgerald offers is deepened when “the audience is no longer just the teacher or the students in the classroom” and “the foot of the student increases” ([Chardin & Novak, 2021, pp. 76-77](#)).

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What is Project Based Learning?

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In connection with inquiry-based learning ([Blessinger & Carfora, 2014, p. 4](#)), ~~Many many~~ consider ~~Project-based learning~~ **Project Based Learning a tool to promote deep learning, using a driving question that is significant to the learners tasked with the inquiry. The question ideally drives sustained student-motivated exploration over time. The **investigations** ~~projects of project based learning~~ “result in artifacts that are concrete and answers the driving question and culminates a learning sequence” ([Miller & Krajcik, 2019](#)). **PBL offers a continuum between product-based and experiential-based learning in order for students to feel a sense of ownership over what is being exhibited to the rest of the community, and self-satisfaction over the steps of inquiry that led them there.****

How can Project Based Learning be tied to community ~~outreach~~ engagement?

~~From the initial~~ conception of project ideas through the final evaluation, ~~community is a recurring motif in project-based learning~~ **offering of a challenging problem or question through to the exhibition of a public product, community is a recurring motif in Project Based Learning. In my experience, effective PBL design elements are centered around communal inquiry.** Students obtain information from ~~community~~ **local** specialists, ~~and design unique end products~~ **public products** that have a ~~positive influence~~ **constructive impact** on the community, ~~and present their ideas to a genuine audience, which is frequently public. In some manner, each of the PBL design elements previously stated involves the community.~~ The capacity to enact knowledge **in an authentic, sustained inquiry** to solve a problem requires a much deeper understanding of ~~said knowledge, as well as the~~ **the** community ~~in~~ which the problem is based out of. ~~In my experience, effective PBL is centered around communal inquiry.~~ Student voice and choice is a vital piece in maintaining sustained inquiry and buy-in from students. If you are looking to have students care about a problem enough to design and workshop solutions for it, let it be a real world problem that students can see in their lives outside of the classroom.

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- **Empathy:** *Who are the people involved? What needs do they have?*
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~~When students activate their empathy, definitive, and ideation muscles while they are practicing content application, learning is enhanced. Learning now has a greater purpose, an altruistic one. Students want to feel like their learning serves a purpose, and what better way to foster a love of learning than altruism.~~

PBL practitioners are attracted to the novel, since communal interest is fostered around inquiries and solutions that are new. When engaging in PBL, it is important to have students and stakeholders alike realize that not all problems have solutions. We cannot expect a group of student inquirers to “fix” institutional issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and systemic racism. Those are obligations that are shared by everybody living, working, and learning in the institution. What we can do as PBL educators is to localize the effects of these challenges by strengthening our bonds to our communities?

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