

IS PBL PRACTICAL?

Although the “learning by doing” approach of project-based learning is well documented as a successful curriculum strategy, it requires a great deal of teacher preparation and is notoriously difficult to administer and assess. Is PBL worth the effort?

No

Project-based learning is too demanding for classroom use on a regular basis. Many of the complaints about NCLB, the push for more valuable assessment, data-driven instruction, and keeping students focused so they perform well on high-stakes exams are valid, but project-based learning is not the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. Instead, it is a difficult-to-manage teaching strategy that has been sold as a cure-all for students who are labeled as gifted, twice exceptional, and in need of more in-depth instruction. It is a tool that is being used with students so they generate their own answers to questions and

think more critically about a topic, while thinking through the process together with their peers. In the reality of classroom management difficulties and students that struggle with basic skills, PBL is a waste of time.

The design of PBL came from medical schools. When a patient goes to the doctor,



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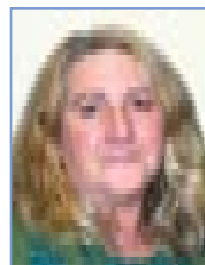
Yes

Every teacher has had a student ask “Why do we have to learn this?” The student is basically asking what relevance school has to his or her future. Project-based learning provides that relevance. A PBL project is an authentic learning experience that is student centered, research based, and connects skills and learning with the world outside the classroom.

Having used PBL extensively in my elementary and high school classes, I have found that each project gave me a better understanding of my students. Because the project is generally geared for small group work (2–3 students per group), students are given the chance to try on roles of leadership and

collaboration in ways ordinary class work does not allow. The teacher not only sees the end product but also has time for close observation of how students work as individuals and in a group.

The best projects ask students to solve real-world problems. If there is a controversial topic in your local area,



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the doctor has to ask questions to solve the problem of why the patient is there. As a patient, we say, “Dr. Gupta, my knee hurts.” Dr. Gupta will reply with a series of questions. “When did it start hurting? Have you had this pain before? On a scale of 1–10, 10 being most painful, what number would you pick to describe this pain?” After this initial assessment, the doctor prescribes physical therapy or medication or perhaps sends us to a specialist. In the classroom, this model does not work nearly as well. In many cases, the problem that is outlined is intentionally very vague, and students do not have an understanding of the situation. In my history classroom, most students have never been exposed to the complexities of war or other concepts difficult to grasp. As the facilitator, it is my job to lead them in the direction of asking good questions and researching the answers to those

questions, but what if the students are not interested in the topic in the first place? Most middle school students do not really take a lot of interest in issues that occurred more than 100 years ago, and it can be difficult to motivate them about things that do not have any direct effect on their lives.

PBL has advantages for advanced learners and older students who are engrossed in a topic that fascinates them. We strive to make all of our students interested in the topics we present to them and actively engage them in learning. Our states dictate what students must know, and NCLB determines if we are meeting these goals. PBL takes more time, energy, and resources for too little payoff. Students who struggle with comprehension of the basic skills struggle further with PBL because their foundations are not strong enough to support it.

ESOL and special education students struggle further, and despite our best attempts at putting these students in groups with “strong” students to help, they still wind up frustrated. Frustrated students are not successful and they do not leave with more knowledge. Instead, they are less motivated and crestfallen. It is not worth putting those students who are in need of our help the most out to sea without a sail. We need to focus our attention on the practices, core ideas, and strategies that work, not those that are the newest educational trend or that only work for exceptional learners.

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ask students to research it, interview people, brainstorm, and use a decision making process to arrive at solutions. The end product could be a letter-writing campaign, a presentation to the mayor, a model, a multimedia presentation submitted to the local news station—the list is endless and the work is important. For students to form conclusions, they must research, compile data, analyze the results, synthesize multiple plans, evaluate each plan, and decide on the best solution and presentation method for the final product. (Please stop and reread the verbs in the previous sentence. Notice how many indicate higher-order thinking skills.) Each group's work reflects the strengths of the students within the group, and with almost every project I have witnessed students rise to challenges and learn more about their own capacity. Technology is a natural component of these projects as students pick and choose the best tools for the tasks.

Another piece of PBL not often addressed is that mistakes are made but students figure out how to fix them. Once in a while the teacher may need to step in to guide a group but usually the students work together to find the solution. Although as a teacher we constantly grade our students' work, it is not often that we allow students to learn from mistakes by finding them and fixing them on their own. In PBL that is a natural occurrence.

Assessment of the end product is usually in the form of a rubric, but the assessment during the project is ongoing through teacher observation and student/teacher conferences. After the project is completed, I always allowed time for reflection with journal writing and a group discussion. As we reflected on the positives and negatives of the project, we developed a basis to improve the design and implementation for the next project.

After a teacher has lived through a few PBL projects, the tasks of assigning, managing, and assessing the projects become second nature. I believe I developed a sixth sense that let me know when my class was ready for a PBL project. That sixth sense is strongest when the students have a good foundation of skills and learning and a local or world event inspired us to greatness. So, is PBL too demanding for classrooms? Definitely not; in fact, I don't know how I could have taught for 16 years without it. It doesn't just make learning relevant; it makes teaching relevant as well.

Susan Thompson has worked in education for 16 years, and has taught many professional development classes for the Massapequa Teacher Center and the New York State Teacher Center. She continues the endeavor of enhancing learning with technology in her present position as Supervisor of Instructional Technology for the Massapequa Public Schools.

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