

8 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PROJECT BASED LEARNING

By Meghan Everettte

PBL means different things to different people: Project-Based Learning, Problem-Based Learning, or even Passion-Based Learning. The real purpose is the same: engage and inspire learners with hands-on, real-life learning. There are as many “right” ways to tackle this as there are different kinds of kids, but there are eight essentials that can start you on the right foot. Here are the basics and some simple ways to apply them.

An important note: the eight essentials are different depending on age, ability, familiarity with project-based learning, and what you want to get from the experience. Not all eight have to be included every day, all the time, to be a successful learning experience.

Projects are not Project Based Learning. That’s a big misconception. PBL units are cross-curricular units of study that draw on many skills, are focused around standards, and seek to answer a problem or overarching questions. They are student-driven, giving lots of voice and choice to students to lead their learning and find solutions for themselves. You just can’t Google a project. (Well, ok, you can Google it and get some amazing resources, but students can’t solve the project that way, which is pretty great for learning!) Sometimes the essentials are combined, and you’ll see a list for five or six, instead of eight, but I like the breakdown that listing them separately provides. The model for these eight come from bie.org, an excellent resource on all-things Project Based Learning.

Significant Content

Significant content means you need some really meaty standards to address. You have to take a look at what big areas will be drawn in while you are learning. Don’t force topics to fit, and don’t kill yourself check-marking every single ELA standard known to man. Remember, you want to be sure your students actually attained knowledge with some type of assessment (even if it’s formative and observed).

Own it: Print your standards and refer to them frequently.

A Need to Know (aka Kickstart)

How are you going to engage your students? The “need to know” generally has some kind of entry event to get students' curiosity up and questions going. This could be a video, an interview, or a real-aloud. When I teach force and motion through designing a roller coaster, the entry event is watching point-of-view rides on some of the world’s most wild coasters. Other times, I bring in a mystery box with some unusual object inside. Anything to get kids’ minds racing and saying, “I need to know more!”

Own it: Find something that will make your kids say, “Wow!” and eager to learn more.

Driving Question There’s a lot of semantic discussion about the driving question vs. a philosophical question or an essential question. The important part is that there is an overarching question that your students are going to answer through in-depth inquiry. A good driving question will capture the project’s focus, be easy to understand, and provide a sense of challenge. All the activities will combine to help

provide an answer to this question. If you can look up the answer in one quick Internet search, the question isn't complex enough.

Own it: Think about what it is you want your students to learn holistically from the project, then check out some great question-writing resources to get you started.

Voice and Choice

You have to throw a party and you are told the day, time, theme, food, decor, and how and when you will speak to guests. Would you care very much about this event? Probably not. Allow students some voice and choice. You don't have to relinquish control; that comes from good class management. This is how students become invested in a project. Wouldn't it be great if each child could set their own learning path and style on which they march down to success? Yup, but since we live in the real world, you have to do age-appropriate gradual release and guide students towards what you want.

I start with a couple of presentation options like two different digital platforms and two different concrete products. Then I back off and allow different research methods, allowing more options as students learn to work together and learn my expectations. Start small and have a clear objective in mind to help students focus on the important part of the work.

Own it: Think of at least two points in your project where your students are given the freedom to decide what course of action to take. It could be as simple as selecting what type of presentation to do.

21st Century Skills

Communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking are the highlights of 21st Century Skills. This could be a blog post by itself, but it comes down to this: understanding and communicating ideas, working with others, producing quality work, and solving problems. Each one of these life skills is a key skill kids will need to work on and improve before and during the project to be successful.

Own it: Review your plans checking for places where each 21st-century skill is hit on. Are students given ample opportunity to talk, work together, and solve problems?

In-Depth Inquiry

When solving a problem or answering a driving question, more questions are created. Rather than spout off answers from your knowledge base, allow students to dive deeper into the subject and find their own way. This not only puts the burden of learning on the student, but it also helps them develop background knowledge to make creative solutions to the original problem. This takes time and it isn't linear. Guide students along, but you have to build in opportunities for them to investigate.

Own it: Plan excess investigation time into your project outline and give students help and structure for finding what they want to know. It's ok to take the path less taken some days as long as it ties into your overall goal.

Reflection and Revision

Sometimes called “Critique,” there has to be an opportunity for students to review their own work and the work of others. This is an ongoing process for students to self-monitor and for me to keep an eye on the group as a whole. I start by showing my students what is expected of them with a smiley-face rubric. During the process, I refer them back to their rubric to check their own work and actions. Group members get a chance to give others feedback on their work and contributions throughout the project as well. This is more effective and helps increase engagement more than one final grade or observation from the teacher.

Own it: Use teamwork rubrics and personal reflection tools to help students contribute and effectively provide feedback throughout learning.

Public Presentation

The opportunity to show off work in a public setting is an important part of project-based learning. Why? Two main reasons: it mimics real life and it raises the bar. Work that a student does to show off has to be good, but work done only for the classroom just has to be good enough. And presenting work publicly lets others ask questions and students must defend themselves. “Public” doesn’t mean huge presentations for everything. Public presentation could be online, where others can access the work, a presentation done for families, or posting work in the community. The project itself will dictate what kind of public audience makes the most sense.

Own it: Think of a way students can present their work to each other and to a broader audience. Bring in voice and choice by having students brainstorm the best presentation options.

Project based learning is an engaging and student-led way to bring real-world problems to the classroom and make plausible solutions while learning core content areas.

*Source: Everette, M (2015, March 11). 8 Essential Elements of Project Based Learning. Scholastic.
<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/blog-posts/meghan-everette/8-essential-elements-project-based-learning/>*