Focus on Learning, Not Just the Project

Posted on

An add-on to the traditional instruction; at the end (or alongside) of the unit	Instruction integrated into the project (The project is the unit!)
Follows direction of the teacher	Driven by student inquiry
Focused on product	Focused on product and process
Often unrelated to standards and skills	Aligned to academic standards and success skills
Can be completed alone and/or at home	Involves collaboration with students and in-class guidance from teacher
Remains within the school world	Has a real-world context and application

How many times have you heard or even said something to the effect of, "We are transforming teaching and learning to meet the demands of the world we live in that continues to evolve at an increasingly rapid pace." As I talk to colleagues and read blogs and research by various thought leaders and practitioners, I notice that the aspirations are more or less the same: We want to create more authentic learning experiences to ensure students develop the skills and mindsets necessary to thrive in a changing world.

To meet these goals many are focused on blended-learning, project-based learning, personal learning. Yet, if you move beyond the labels and talk about instructional practices that promote learning and how they move us toward the desired outcomes for learners, we begin to see that our beliefs and experiences don't always translate to our practices.

It's comforting to label learning and "implement" an approach or program but if we don't have a common understanding of what that looks like in the classroom, how can we support teachers to truly put the vague ideas into practice in any consistent way for learners. I'm not talking about all teachers being on the same page at the same time, I am talking about have a clear understanding of what learning looks like and having deeper conversations that are open and honest about how our practices and the learning experiences we create can truly make an impact.

Projects vs Learning

In a recent blog by PBL Works, they highlighted the following graphic that identifies the difference between doing a project and Project-based learning

DESSERT "DOING A PROJECT"	MAIN COURSE PROJECT BASED LEARNING
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Focused on product	Focused on product and process
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End result of project displayed in the classroom	Results of project shared beyond the classroom with a public audience

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Graphic from PBLWorks.Com

In Project Based Learning, the project itself is used to teach rigorous academic content and success skills. Students work to answer an important question—such as "How can we impact hunger in our community?" By exploring the question over a couple weeks or longer, students become immersed in it, pursuing answers from various angles.
Through this process, they apply what they're learning in meaningful ways. Instruction is incorporated into the project, which is designed to meet appropriate academic goals and standards. The project work creates a genuine need for students to learn grade-level content and skills, while working collaboratively, thinking critically and engaging in reflection and revision.
PBL Works

I shared some of what I see often when people focus on the project and not the learning in this blog but here is the gist:

When the focus is on the project or "doing a PBL" rather than what students are learning, we are focused on the wrong aspect of project-based learning. More so, if you do a project and as soon as it is done go back to the worksheets or the textbook, we signal that the project was the goal, not necessarily the learning.
Try this instead.
If you start with the learners and the learning goals and then determine which of that many strategies and/ or resources are best to support the desired learning and

prioritize your time accordingly to integrate rather than segment them, your students can achieve your learning goals through authentic and meaningful project-based learning.

4 Key **Prompts to Focus on Learning**, Not Just the Project

I was working with educators this week on creating clear learning targets and success criteria so that learners could appropriately navigate their learning path in a way that met their needs to get to the explicit learning goals. We used the following prompts to assess strengths, challenges and determine the next steps. They can be used as coaching questions or reflection prompts but the goal is to assess where you are in relation to your goals and consider your next steps to move forward.

Overall Goals

- Why does this project matter?
- How does it connect to your learners and their community?
- What successes have you had so far that you want to build on?
- What are some challenges or goals that you have to improve the learning experience?

Success Criteria + Assessment

- What do you want students to learn through this project?
    - What are the academic goals i.e knowledge, core content?
    - What are your social/ emotional learning goals?

- What does success look like?
- How are you structuring your assignments and tasks to help students meet the success criteria?
- How will you communicate the goals and criteria for success to students?
- How might students self assess or set goals based on the success criteria?
- When/ how might you provide feedback to students based on the success criteria?

Meaningful Learning Experiences

- What are the key milestones of your project?
- How might these learning experiences provide authentic and relevant experiences that connect to your learners?
- How might students collaborate with peers, experts, mentors throughout this project?
- How will students learn and develop the skills that you will be assessing?
- How might you include opportunities for more voice and choice?
- How might you provide opportunities for sustained inquiry?

Authentic Audience

- How will students share what they know or present their learning to an authentic audience?
- How might students be engaged in opportunities for critique and revision?
- How will you make student learning visible?

These questions or prompts are not intended to be addressed all at once but I see them as sequential. Before you start thinking about the audience and all the fun learning experiences, it is important o be clear about your learning targets and what success will look like. If not, projects can become fun activities without meaningful learning and growth that we are ultimately responsible for as educators. One of the biggest criticisms that I hear from project-based learning or personalized learning is that students may have fun but won't learn the basic skills or key knowledge. However, when these projects or any learning experience is developed with a clear end in mind it is imperative that they learn the key skills and knowledge to complete the project.

Too often our visions speak from our hearts and what we know is important for our students and our collective futures yet the learning experiences, feedback, and assessments don't always align with our goals. To create this alignment and maximize our time and resources, we need to determine what we want students to know, what they should be able to do with what they know, and align our learning experiences to provide the best opportunity to achieve the desired outcomes.