

Planning Projects

Misconceptions about Project-Based Learning

When people hear the phrase "project-based learning" (PBL), different concepts and definitions may come to mind. These may include some common misconceptions, such as:

Project-based learning means huge, messy projects.

While all projects require advanced planning to keep them on track, they vary widely in scope, length, and amount of advanced organization. For example, a service learning project on a local pollution source is more complex in scope, extends over more time, and requires more prior coordination than an in-class debate, which is more contained and easier to organize. The best rule-of-thumb for projects is to keep them manageable by staying focused on standards and learning objectives while seeking authentic, real-world context for students to apply their learning. Teachers who move to project approaches find that it's best to start small and expand that project-based unit the following school year.

Project-based learning means I need to get rid of all the other things I am currently doing.

Project-based learning is one instructional method that a teacher may use within a repertoire of methods. Project-based learning incorporates and accounts for varied teaching strategies and learning styles and is a way to build on current instruction to enrich learning experiences and make more efficient use of time. The focus of an educator has not changed. The goal remains to teach students what they need to know and be able to do. Project-based learning simply provides a different approach to reaching this goal.

Project-based learning means a lot of work.

For some teachers the shift to project-based learning may not encompass many challenges, but for others the idea may be

overwhelming. If you are new to PBL the best way to approach it may be to start small. Starting small may mean incorporating one or two instructional methods at a time while building up to the complete design and implementation of a PBL unit plan.

Little by little the benefits of project-based learning will be uncovered, and the shift to PBL will develop over time and lead to bigger ideas and better designs.

Project-based learning means a lot of planning and preparation.

Developing effective projects that balance rigorous content objectives with student-driven tasks and outcomes takes time and skill. The best projects result from careful planning and anticipation of every detail. This is no different than planning effective instruction using any instructional strategy.

In order to be successful, projects need to be designed with the end in mind. Without closely focused learning goals, the purpose of the project can become unclear and expectations for student learning outcomes can be miscommunicated. With a backwards design approach to project-based learning, educators are offered a solid structure to planning. The structure is framed around different stages of design.

Stage one is determining specific learning goals by using content standards:

- What knowledge is worth spending time to uncover?
- What is important for students to know how to do?

Stage two continues with creating Curriculum-Framing Questions:

- What are the big concept you are trying to uncover?
- What is the long-term understanding you want the students to gain?
- What questions go to the heart of what you want them to learn?
- How will the Essential, Unit, and Content Questions help focus the learning for your students?

Stage three of backwards design involves determining assessment evidence:

- What are the formal and informal types of assessment that are going to be used throughout the unit of study?
- What evidence will show that students understood the content and met the standards?

Finally, after curricula standards have been decided, questions generated, and assessment determined, the last stage, planning activities, is implemented. Teachers:

- Design learning experiences,
- Gather resources and materials, and
- Incorporate instructional strategies

Project Ideas

Projects are in-depth investigations of real world topics and issues that are worthy for students to know and understand. They can incorporate creative role play, construction, technology, community, and various curriculum topics in order for students to learn the content and show what they know. Some types of projects can be:

- **Service learning:** These projects often involve the local community and allow students to apply lessons learned in the classroom to real world situations. Constructing a plan to clean up the local waterways or designing a playground for the local park are some examples of service learning projects.
- **Simulation/role play:** These projects are designed to provide students with an authentic, first hand experience. Students role play another's persona or immerse into simulated environments that recreate a certain time or place. Simulation and role play are excellent ways to reflect on history, gain multiple perspectives, or create empathy.
- **Construction and design:** These projects are based on real-life needs or can be created by a make-believe scenario. They require students to construct actual models or design plans to create solutions to authentic problems.
- **Problem-solving:** These are any projects that require students to devise solutions to real world problems. They may include a make believe scenario or an actual dilemma. The problems may involve a classroom or school issue, such as playground design; a community issue, like wetlands conservation; or an issue of greater scale, such as global warming.
- **Telecollaborative:** These projects are online educational tasks. They provide real world learning experiences while collaborating online with other classes, experts, or communities.