An Introduction to Project-based Learning

for Language Futures Teachers

Project-based Learning

'Project-based learning' refers to students designing, planning, and carrying out an extended project that produces a publicly-exhibited output such as a product, publication, or presentation.

Projects could last anything from a week to a whole term, but should grant students independence to create an authentic final product, requiring them to explore a subject or a combination of subjects deeply throughout the production.

The length of a project should be determined by two things:
1) Is there enough content to warrant the time?
2) Does the project still engage students?

The Building Blocks

1) Exhibition

When students know that the work they are creating in a project will be displayed publicly, this changes the nature of the project from the moment they start working – because they know they will need to literally 'stand by' their work, under scrutiny and questioning from family, friends, and total strangers.

This inspires a level of ambition and commitment much greater than is fuelled by the incentive of 'getting good marks'. In addition, students' families, as well as other people from the local community, get to see what is going on in the school, providing an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the school and community.

Exhibitions can take many forms, and this is something that can be explored in a creative manner. Some examples of exhibitions include: a gallery of the students' work for students to lead parents and community members through; a factual guide book detailing the students' findings, such as a local history guide in the target language; students presenting their ideas on a topic in public debate; a 'Come Dine with Me' video filmed in the target language.

It is important that there is an authentic audience for exhibitions, so when designing a scheme of work, consider who in your school community could benefit from the exhibition: parents, other students, local community groups or even national figures. The more authentic your audience is for student work, the more impact it will have. As you plan your project, consider what a professional would do with the same piece of work. For example, an author would publish his book and have a book signing. An artist would exhibit at a museum. An entrepreneur would market her ideas to local businesses. The closer students' experiences are to that of the professional world, the better.

2) Multiple drafts and critique

Ron Berger gives an eloquent explanation of the value of multiple drafts:

"In most schools, students turn in first drafts – work that doesn't represent their best effort and that is typically discarded after it has been graded and returned. In life, when the quality of one's work really matters, one almost never submits a first draft. An ethic of excellence requires revision."

Ron Berger, Chief Program Officer at Expeditionary Learning

A critical part of the re-drafting process is student critique. Formal critique sessions give students the opportunity to learn from each other's work and from each other's feedback in a structured, safe context – this can include critique of the process ('how I made this thing') as well as product ('the thing I made').

It is important to teach students explicitly how to give meaningful feedback to each other. A full step-by-step guide to instil the critique technique in your class is on the Innovation Unit's detailed guide to project-based learning, and can also be found on these Expeditionary Learning videos. The three ground rules are to be kind, specific and helpful.

The case for giving students time to engage in critique sessions and make multiple drafts of their work is hard to refute – the trouble is that it's difficult to make time for more than one draft, which is one reason why it is so important to produce a realistic project timeline when you are designing your project. Multiple drafts are also valuable for personalising assessment, because they provide you with the means to assess not only a student's final product, but also the extent to which they have improved their work since the first draft. This can be valuable for all students, but it is particularly helpful for

students with special educational needs, and students for whom English is not a first language.

Students support one another with pronunciation at Gladesmore Community School

3) An essential question

The best projects always contain an 'essential question' that both inspires and requires students to conduct serious research. An essential question provides the framework for the entire project and each learning experience should contribute to answering the question.

It's never too early to start thinking about the essential question (or questions) that your students will be pursuing. However, the essential question will probably change as you design your project, and it may be that once you have finished the design, your essential question has transformed completely since you first started thinking about it.

There are three criteria for a compelling essential question:

• It should be a question that people ask in the 'real world'

• It should be a question that has no easy answer, and stretches students' intellectual muscles

• It should be a question that ignites students' imaginations

Moving towards a project-based approach to planning: planning your project

1) Get an idea

This is where the initial spark for a project comes from: from your passions, or from a colleague's passion, or, indeed, from a student's passion. The important thing is that somebody is very excited about the idea, and that person's excitement is infectious. Of course, there is much more to projects than excitement, but if you don't start with something that you feel passionate about, the project won't be much fun, and the quality of the work will suffer.

A project's initial spark may take many forms: it could be a question, such as 'why don't more people like contemporary art?', it could be a product that you'd like students to make, or it could even be an exhibition venue that you want to take advantage of (for example, a local museum that would be interested in displaying student work).

Project ideas can come from a variety of places. You may look at the national curriculum and see a real world application for the learning. You may have a brilliant idea for a final product or exhibition and work backwards from there. You may 'borrow' your idea from a website database such as the ones created by Expeditionary Learning, High Tech High or Buck Institute. You may get inspiration from a trip that you take or by simply walking down the street and seeing a catchy advert. Wherever your initial idea comes from, it's important to ensure that it both speaks to the passions of you and your students and that there is sufficient content knowledge required to execute it.

Once you have an idea for a project, consider the following:

Will this project engage my students?

Before going too far with an idea for a project ask yourself whether the project is:

- Placed – is it located in a place that is important to students (e.g. their home, community, town, city or virtual environment)?
- Purposeful – will it result in a product, service or body of knowledge that others will make use of? Will the process seem authentic to students?
- Pervasive – will students be sufficiently engaged in the project's activities that they'll want to voluntarily take the learning outside school and school hours? Is it likely to broaden students' horizons?
- Passion-led – Does the project tap into students' passions?

Will this project engage me?

If you're not passionate about the project, you'll struggle to support your students through their blocks and dead-ends.

Will my students learn something meaningful from this project?

Make a list of the things you expect your students to have learned: this should include subject content, skills, as well as attributes to be developed (e.g. confidence, resilience, and resourcefulness).

Once you've answered 'yes' to all of these questions, it is time to involve students in refining an essential question, involve colleagues in designing your scheme of work, or project plan, and contact experts outside the school for advice – your language mentors could be particularly helpful.

2) Design the project

Decide what your students should learn by the end of the project, check this against what they need to know in terms of any 'required' content such as in the National Curriculum, then 'backwards plan' to see how you will check students have learnt what they need to throughout the project.

Make a project plan of what will happen when, and include regular assessment here. Remember to plan for multiple drafts of assessed work and for student critique as well as teacher assessment, and factor in the role your language mentors will play. When embedding assessment points throughout the project, make sure that they are both authentic and provide more than just a mark in the mark book. Assessments should guide the learning and teaching. If students aren't able to modify their learning and teachers aren't able to modify their teaching as a result of the assessment, then the assessment serves little purpose.

When designing the project, think about which aspects are non-negotiable and which aspects can be personalised for different students. Successful projects are designed so that students make decisions for themselves throughout the process, and having different language groups is a good excuse to give students autonomy over aspects of their work – they can't all do exactly the same thing. Your non-negotiables should serve as the basis for most of your assessments. They are the things that every student will complete the project knowing. From there, allow students room to make decisions for themselves and have autonomy over aspects of their work. Allowing for student voice and choice is often one of the biggest motivators for students.

Once you have designed the project, go back to colleagues – at your own school or further afield – to 'tune' the project. Share your project plan, an

example you've made of the product that students completing the project will produce, and your burning questions surrounding it, and ask for honest feedback.

Students use the support of their language mentors and instruments around the room to access the curriculum during project 'I am the music man' at Linton Village College. See languagefutures.org.uk for this and other projects.

3) Do the project

By this point, as you have planned and adapted this project so thoughtfully, you are left to implement your plan. Just two things to bear in mind:

- Beginning the project: this is the time to engage your students, so hook them in, sharing your passion for the project then creating a forum for them to explore and discuss the issues the project will address.
- Adapting the project: don't be a slave to the project plan. Check in with your students regularly and be ready to respond to what you hear and adapt the plan accordingly.

4) Exhibit the project

The first thing to say here is that booking the exhibition venue should be one of the first things you do when you're planning a project. There are lots of possible venues for exhibitions: museums, galleries, parks, cafés, churches, community centres, etc. One British teacher, Vanessa Ryan, held a premier of student-produced films in a local movie theatre by guaranteeing that the audience would spend at least £250 on food and drink.

You will need to promote the exhibition to appropriate bodies early on, and assign clear roles on the day to your students and other involved parties.

Finally… when it's all over, keep student work, or records of it, so you can share with next year's cohort!

Checklist

You've planned your project and you're ready to go. Use this checklist to make sure all the essentials are in place before you get started:

- An **idea** for the project that you feel passionate about
- A **hook** to get the students raring to go from Lesson 1
- An **essential question** that inspires serious research over an extended period
- Clear **objectives** for the project
- **Backwards planning**: clear objectives for each session that feed into the overall objective
- **Flexibility**: what if things don't go exactly to plan? Plan for the possibility of change because something didn't work or an idea should be explored further
- **Critique**: where will students support each other to improve their work? Remember to factor in teaching the techniques of critique, especially where this is the students' first introduction to it
- Time for **redrafting**: students should have time to use feedback to create multiple drafts and produce work they are proud of
- **Exhibition** space for your final exhibition – this should be booked at the beginning of the project
- An **authentic audience** who will benefit from the students' work and motivate the students to produce high quality products

For further information on the Language Futures project, please email languagefutures@all-languages.org.uk