Years 3–6

10

REVISED EDITION
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

10 Projects for the PBL Classroom: English

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INTRODUCTION

Why Project-Based Learning?

Twenty-first century skills, or survival skills, as termed by Tony Wagner in his book *The Global Achievement Gap* (2014), involve students being able to do more than memorise facts and instead apply skills and, more importantly, problem solve (Stoof, Martens, Van Merriënboer & Bastiaens, 2002). In short, teachers are tasked with the difficult job of trying to create thinkers. This results from businesses complaining that the best and brightest students that the educational system is sending their way are very intelligent but woefully inept at figuring out problems, arguing students know a lot of "facts" but are not "competent" (Bastiaens & Martens, 2000). Any teacher able to help students become these thinkers would be providing them with an advantage when they enter the real world.

The educational system has to do a better job of preparing students to solve real-world problems. How do we do that in the current system of standards and testing? With so much at stake on these achievement tests, the bigger question is: how often in life are we asked to take a pencil-and-paper test? Not very often unless you count online personality quizzes. In real life we are usually dealing with projects, either at work, home or other settings. If we truly want to get students ready for the real world, we should be teaching them how to handle the real-world dilemma of a project.

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As mentioned in *Project-Based Learning for Gifted Students: A Handbook for the 21st-Century Classroom* (Stanley, 2012), according to the Buck Institute for Education, research studies have demonstrated project-based learning can:

- increase academic achievement on standardised assessment tests;
- teach maths, science, humanities and health-related subjects more effectively than traditional teaching methods;
- increase long-term retention of knowledge, skill development and student and teacher satisfaction;
- prepare students to integrate and explain concepts better than traditional instructional methods;
- prove especially helpful for low-achieving students;
- present a workable model for larger school reform; and
- help students to master 21st-century skills such as communication, independent and critical thinking and research. (p. 4)

This is why project-based learning is such a good fit for creating such thinkers. It has been discovered that students:

- prefer to structure their own tasks they are working on and establish deadlines as opposed to having the teacher assign them (Dunn, Dunn & Price, 1984; Renzulli, Smith & Reis, 1982; Stewart, 1981);
- learn more and retain content more accurately when allowed to work on projects in which they set the pace (Whitener, 1989);
- show an increased benefit in learning when they teach each other through projects (Johnsen-Harrris, 1983; Kingsley, 1986);
- show improvement in cooperative learning skills when working in groups because they must work together to solve problems (Peterson, 1997); and
- show increased engagement after participating in PBL than students who did not (Grant & Branch, 2005; Horton, Hedetniemi, Weigert & Wagner, 2006; Johnston, 2004; Jones & Kalinowski, 2007; Ljung & Blackwell, 1996; McMiller, Lee, Saroop, Green & Johnson, 2006; Toolin, 2004).

Based on this research, a better question to ask is not why use project-based learning, but rather why not use project-based learning?

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What Are the Advantages of Using PBL in an English Classroom?

Project-based learning is an excellent vehicle to teach 21st-century skills. In *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times* (2009), Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel mentioned, among valuable 21st-century skills, eight specific skills that PBL can effectively teach:

1. public speaking
2. problem solving
3. collaboration
4. critical thinking
5. information literacy
6. creativity
7. adaptability
8. self-direction. (p. viii)

Many of these are crucial for the English classroom. These are skills that can be worked into many PBL projects and that allow students to develop confidence in them over time. They also tie in to many of the content descriptions found in the Australian Curriculum for Years 3–5, such as:

- Literacy:
  - Interpreting, analysing, evaluating: Read different types of texts by combing contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge using the text processing strategies (e.g. predicting and confirming, monitoring meaning, skimming and scanning, cross-checking and reviewing).
  - Texts in context: Identify the point of view in a text and suggest alternative points of view.
  - Creating texts: Re-read and edit students' own and others' work using agreed upon criteria for text structures and language features.
  - Creating texts: Use a range of software including word processing programs to construct, edit and publish written text, and select, edit and place visual, print and audio elements.
- Literature:
  - Literature and context: Identify aspects of literary texts that convey details or information about particular social cultural and historical contexts.

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- Responding to literature: Present a point of view about particular literary texts using appropriate metalanguage, and reflecting on the viewpoints of others.
- Examining literature: Recognise that ideas in literary texts can be conveyed from different viewpoints, which can lead to different kinds of interpretations and responses.
- Creating literature: Create literary text using realistic and fantasy settings and characters that draw on the worlds represented in texts students have experienced.

- Language:
  - Language variation and change: Understand that the pronunciation, spelling and meanings of words have histories and change over time.
  - Text structure and organisation: Understand how texts are made cohesive through the use of linking devices including pronoun reference and text connectives.
  - Language for interaction: Understand how to move beyond making bare assertions and take account of differing perspectives and points of view.
  - Language for interaction: Understand differences between the language of opinion and feeling and the language of factual reporting or recording.

Trilling and Fadel (2009) define information literacy as the ability to:

- access information efficiently and effectively,
- evaluate information critically and competently and
- use information accurately and creatively. (p. 65)

This is not only a skill for the classroom – this is a skill for life. If you want to figure out what time to see a movie or where you need to go for your appointment at a new dentist, you will have to figure out where to get this information, how to tell if the information is correct and how to use the information. Any time you are doing research in the classroom, information literacy will be very valuable. This information can come in the form of print resources or electronic resources.

Project-based learning allows students to use information literacy to complete a given project. Research papers, presentations, portfolios

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The student's goal in an oral presentation is to verbally teach classmates or the audience what they have learnt after researching a particular topic or skill. A successful oral presentation needs to be set up just like an essay would, with a topic sentence, supporting details and several drafts before the final presentation. This structure is something that should be taught to students. This can be done with modelling, looking at exemplary examples of great oral presentations or practising presentations with no consequences.

Recommended Reading Talk

Do you have a favourite book or a book that you really enjoyed recently? How would you convince others to read this book? How would you tell your friends about this book?

In this project, students will give a 10-minute oral presentation about one of their favourite books or a book they have read recently and enjoyed. The purpose of the presentation is to convince others to read the book by showing what they liked about it.

Materials

- Project Outline: Recommended Reading Talk (student copies)
- Suggested Timeline
- Lesson: How to Give a Recommended Reading Talk
- Lesson: What Makes a Good Presentation?
- Handout 1.1: Discussion Questions (student copies)
- Handout 1.2: What Makes a Good Presentation? (student copies)
- Handout 1.3: Peer Review (student copies)
- Product Rubric (student copies)

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Create Your Own Political Party

In this project, students will be divided into groups of three and create their own political party. Like all political parties, they need to develop a platform that displays their beliefs as a party. This platform will eventually be displayed in leader and deputy leader speeches and a campaign poster at an upcoming caucus meeting.

Materials

- Project Outline: Create Your Own Political Party (student copies)
- Suggested Timeline
- Lesson: How to Write a Good Speech
- Lesson: How to Give a Good Speech
- Handout 2.1: Political Party Graphic Organiser (student copies)
- Handout 2.2: Basic Structure of Your Political Speech (student copies)
- Handout 2.3: How to Give a Good Speech (student copies)
- Handout 2.4: Peer Review (student copies)
- Product Rubric (student copies)

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