PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Time Management With PBL

Tips on integrating project-based learning into your curriculum—even in shorter class periods.

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Teachers are always concerned with time—we never have enough. Time can be even more of a concern when teachers implement project-based learning (PBL), as it changes the way we do things and does require time for students to produce and create.

This raises a challenge: How do we restructure time for students to learn through PBL? Here are some considerations as you [plan for project implementation](https://www.edutopia.org/article/planning-pbl-implementation) and consider the use of time.

4 CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING PBL TIME WELL

1. Pick the right stuff: While I wish I could say that we can all do wall-to-wall PBL all the time, many of us teach in a context that doesn’t allow for that. We’re held accountable for teaching and assessing numerous outcomes and standards, and that requires us to set priorities.

One strategy is to audit your year and course for learning that you think is critical to students. What are the things that students need to know, and what are the things that are nice to know? Teachers can do this in a simple T-Chart format or other graphic organizer. From this list, teachers can target those need-to-know topics, standards, or concepts.

A more intensive, but related way to target these priorities is to go through the full process of identifying priority standards. In fact, your school or district might have already done this. Former teacher and education consultant Larry Ainsworth recommends using [these criteria](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.tepsa.org/resource/resmgr/imported/Resources/many-realcriteria.pdf):

* Readiness: This standard provides students with essential knowledge and skills necessary for success in the next class, course, or grade level.
* Endurance: This standard provides students with knowledge and skills that are useful beyond a single test or unit of study.
* Assessed: This standard will be assessed on upcoming state and national exams.
* Leverage: This standard will provide students with knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines.

We should also apply the criterion of teacher judgment, which allows for teachers to consider standards that should be prioritized specific to their context and community. Using their judgment also allows for more teacher voice in the process and leverages teachers’ expertise. Once priority standards have been selected, using their judgment allows teachers to focus their efforts on designing projects to target them.

2. For 60-minute class periods: If you’re limited to a traditional amount of time like a 60-minute class period, you might be wondering if it’s even possible to implement PBL.

Instead of attempting to do everything in one hour, sequence instruction, assessment, and project work time. Within any class period, focus on one or two objectives and sequence them to model inquiry and design thinking. For example, after the project launch, you may use a few days for teacher-led instruction, from mini-lectures to readings to lab work. After that initial instruction, use a day or two for project work time or ideation.

You might start with a formative assessment on content previously taught, and then have students set goals for their work time or look back at previous task lists to delegate work within groups.

As students work over days, assess their learning and follow up in later class periods with further instruction and scaffolding.

3. For 90-minute (or longer) class periods: A greater amount of time lends itself well to including project work time, but you don’t necessarily need to devote all of a period to open project work. In fact, students may not know how to use all that time effectively.

You can start out with teacher-directed activities, but student-directed reflections and goal setting are also excellent ways to start. Before getting into team work, students might do a [team builder](https://www.teachthought.com/critical-thinking/10-team-building-games-that-promote-critical-thinking/) to set the tone—have them do [the human knot](http://www.group-games.com/ice-breakers/human-knot-icebreaker.html) activity as a fun way to demonstrate collaborative problem solving, or have them each give a brief “[weather report](https://centerforadolescentstudies.com/6-ways-check-with-teens/)” on how they’re feeling that day as a way of building trust within the community. Teachers have many of these tools in their toolkit, and PBL group work is a great time to leverage them.

In the middle of the class period, students can [create tasks lists and set deadlines for tasks](http://www.bie.org/objects/cat/student_handouts). For example, they might set the goal of creating six slides for a presentation in 20 minutes, and then bring them to you. Similarly, you might tell students that there will be a critique protocol in the middle of the period, holding them accountable for using the time effectively and providing an activity to help them improve.

Don’t forget [brain breaks and other strategies](https://www.edutopia.org/article/tyranny-of-on-task-andrew-miller) to break up the work, and include quiet time for individual thinking and work to allow for balance and different ways of working and thinking on a project.

4. There’s a right way to implement separate project blocks: One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to set aside separate time for PBL outside the curriculum. This sends the wrong message. PBL should be the main course of the curriculum, not a dessert.

When you have a math block, a literacy block, and then a PBL block, you send the message that PBL may or may not be connected to content and learning outcomes. Similarly, when you take a week out for PBL, you may send an inconsistent message of the level of connectedness between PBL and the curriculum.

That being said, you can structure your day with tasks such as English instruction, science lab, and then project work time, if you reinforce that the project is an integral part of the content—the literacy work is relevant to the product students will create, the lab will help students learn content valuable to the project, and there will be time to tinker, think, and create using that content in the work time. The key here is to make sure that it’s all connected.