

TEACHER LEADERSHIP

What Does Successful Project-Based Learning Look Like?

JULY 5, 2011 | BOB LENZ

The end of the school year presents us with an opportunity for reflection at Envision Schools (1). We take a final measure of students' progress throughout the school year, celebrate the many Envision graduates that will be heading off to college in the fall, and consider how we can incorporate those lessons into improving our own work to best enable, encourage, and ensure student learning.

And so last week, I joined our principals, vice principals, and lead teachers at our annual three-day leadership institute to take stock of the past year: We analyzed data; made plans for the new school year based on both our experience and data, and explored essential questions that had arisen during the school year. This year, we tackled the questions, *what is a project?* and, *what makes a well-designed project?* We used these two questions to confirm and reaffirm why we believe in the use of project-based learning at Envision Schools.

In order to get grounded, we looked at student work together and listened to teachers describe their projects. After each, we asked, "is this a project?" and then, if yes, "is it a well-designed project?"

One project that we interrogated was called the BP Oil Spill Project, used in twelfth-grade AP Environmental Science and AP Government (many of our projects are cross-disciplinary). Students were asked to explore the question, "Who was responsible for the oil spill in the Gulf in 2010?" In order to answer that question and demonstrate their knowledge, students studied the ecological effects of the spill and conducted labs on possible dispersants in their science course. In their government classes, they explored the policy and the bureaucracy related to the disaster.

To culminate, they prepared and conducted a simulated congressional hearing to demonstrate their knowledge of the government standards, and had to write and perform a

speech (in character!) at the hearing. After investigating several projects like this project, we began to define what I call "PBL, Envision-Style."

Our Working Definition

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching approach, a mindset, and a framework for teaching skills and content. (Both our working definition and criteria are derived from our own work, as well as the work of, Adria Steinberg's 6 A's of PBL **(2)**, The Buck Institute for Education **(3)**, and Expeditionary Learning **(4)**.)

High-quality, PBL "Envision-Style" includes:

- **A timeline that is short or long**, ranging from a few days to several weeks, so students learn how to benchmark and manage projects of different sizes.
- **An engaging launch** to hook students into taking on the project.
- **Academic rigor and alignment with standards** allowing students to master content knowledge and skills, and to demonstrate or apply that knowledge.
- **An inquiry** into a student-friendly, provocative essential question that drives the learning. This question often drives the unit or is one of the larger questions in the discipline. For example, "Who am I?"
- **A demonstration of key knowledge and skills** in which students show evidence through the product that they have mastered the standards outlined in the course map (state standards).
- **Applied learning** so that students think and do something new with their knowledge or skills.
- **An authentic audience** that ensures the students take the project, learning, and results seriously and present it professionally (e.g. the class, students from another class, staff, parents, or professionals).
- **High-quality products or performance at the end** that show the results of inquiry into a question through applied knowledge and skills (presentation, artistic representation, written and performed speeches, poster or video documentation of: simulation, Socratic, debate, defense). A non-traditional product might be an added layer to a traditional product such as an essay or test e.g., students might debate after writing a research paper.

What do you think of our definition and our characteristics? What would you add or delete? Where have you seen these characteristics in action? Help us refine and evolve our work with your comments, suggestions, and examples.

Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/project-based-learning-definition-bob-lenz

Links

- 1 www.envisionschools.org
- 2 www.smallschoolsproject.org/index.asp?siteid=tools&id=616
- 3 www.bie.org/
- 4 elschools.org/

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