

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Personalized PBL: Student-Designed Learning

JUNE 27, 2014

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Photo credit: Thinkstock

I wrote a blog about one of the pitfalls of personalization (<http://www.wholechildeducation.org/blog/the-missing-piece-of-personalization-passion-and-engagement>) for the ASCD Whole Child Blog (<http://www.wholechildeducation.org/blog>) . Specifically, that pitfall is the lack of engagement. With all the focus on personalization through time, pacing, and place, it can be easy to forget about the importance of engagement. No matter where students learn, when they learn, and the timing of the learning, engagement drives them to learn. When we factor all the pieces of personalization (<http://www.personalizelearning.com/2013/03/new-personalization-vs-differentiation.html>) together, we can truly meet students where they are and set them on a path of learning that truly meets their needs and desires. Project-based learning can be an effective engagement framework to engage students in personalized learning.

Moving Past "Course-Based" PBL

Due to the antiquated restraints of the education system, most educators are forced to implement PBL in a "course-based" manner. This means that the project occurs within the traditional discipline structures, where there may be integration, but learning is framed within grades and competencies. In addition, start and stop times, driven by the Carnegie unit (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnegie_Unit_and_Student_Hour) , force teachers to start and stop a project for all of their students around the same time. What if PBL wasn't held to antiquated rules of time, space, and discipline constructs? In that ideal situation, students could be engaged in personalized projects.

Student-Designed Projects

Students at Phoenix High School have been engaged in a model similar to the one I've described (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovkW8M8vD5o>) . In it, students design their own driving questions and select the 21st century skills they want to work on, as well as the content learning objectives. They select and design their own products to show their learning in a true commitment to performance assessment. They decide on due dates, benchmarks, and the authentic audience of the work. There is also a heavy push toward community impact and work outside the four walls of the classroom.

My PBL colleague, Erin Sanchez (http://bie.org/people/erin_sanchez) , (formally Erin Thomas), created an

amazing graphic of this continuum (<http://gsn-newdemo2.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/1113/original/PBLearningContinuum.pdf?1392824673>) that shows the power of PBL truly aligned to the learner. As teaching colleagues, we did our best to implement personalized projects for students, and we experienced many of the same challenges faced by teachers who attempt to do this. However, we also saw the payoff: engagement! When students are truly in the driver's seat of their learning, the impact of their work and the learning associated with it can be powerful!

Role of the Teacher

When teachers move toward personalized PBL, their role continues to shift, just as it does when teachers move traditional instruction to "course-based" PBL. While still involved in the design process, they also serve as advisors. Teachers frequently use question techniques to help students focus and crystalize their projects and project plans. They coach students in creating effective driving questions and student products. They're still involved in frequent formative assessments, but instead of planning all instructional activity for the students, they help students plan it themselves. In addition, teachers help students select standards and learning targets that will align with the project and products. Teachers at Phoenix High School, for example, help ensure that all standards are targeted for a year, but do not limit the standards that students may want to hit in a project. Here the teachers create and facilitate the infrastructure for the learning rather than designing the PBL projects themselves.

Not every teacher may be ready to jump into this type of personalization. To make it work, they'll be required to adopt a different teaching role. They'll need strong management skills and a commitment to disruptive innovation. In addition, the current constructs of the education system may hold us back. What if we could make this dream of personalized PBL a reality? I say that we work toward it, creating a push on the system that demands change in the education of our students.

Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/personalized-pbl-student-designed-learning-andrew-miller

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