

Thoughts on PBL and Assessment

By John Blossom (Spring, 2016)

In a traditional classroom, assessment revolves around determining how well students acquire the knowledge and skills the teacher – or school district - determines are important. In its purest form, testing is used to determine success. If further work is desired by the student, it usually comes in the form of “extra credit” done for an additional grade or credit of some sort.

In a PBL environment, the project is the assessment; the project is the test. The project cannot be accomplished without acquisition of knowledge and skills, so that takes care of “standards” and “requirements.” The more important assessment emphasis in a PBL environment, however, is on what skills and knowledge the students acquire above and beyond initial expectations. A PBL teacher assesses what inquiry directions and skills are emerging in her individual students and gives permission for those to develop in an atmosphere of mutual discovery.

The “Real” Factor:

One thing that intimidates teachers contemplating dipping their feet into the PBL river is the stories of PBL classrooms that have been unimaginably successful – the eighth grade class that proposes a new state bird and gets on the news for bringing their petition to the state capital, or the high school class that opens a food bank, or another that raises an incredible amount of money for an overseas charity. Not to take anything away from these accomplishments, but nothing as spectacular is required to be a successful PBL teacher – all it takes is a minor dose of “real,” and your PBL classroom will be teaching the very same knowledge and skills.

Simple ways to provide “real”:

1. Offer creative opportunities for students to teach each other what you would normally teach to them. The opportunity to “be the teacher” is a great dose of “real,” and reflects, of course, the highest level of learning in Bloom’s Taxonomy.
2. Invite parents, other students, and community members to exhibitions of learning. (Nothing is more real than presenting what you have learned to others. Don’t think for a moment that I didn’t learn a whole bunch about teaching by being invited to present to you today!)
3. Connect with parents and the outside community somehow. Look for real challenges in the community – and the community need only be your school.

The “Simplicity” factor:

The key to a great PBL project is simplicity in structure and complexity in execution. I can give “English teacher” examples: I have learned that if I want to turn my middle and high school students into passionate journal writers, I simply have to say to them to write as many words as you can in ten minutes and we’ll count them up. Do that every day for two months and you have a classroom of writers. Why? Because the structure of what they see as an accomplishment is simple – how many words can I write in one journal session – but the execution is complex because writing is hard and gets

easier only with time and practice. Another example is that I will sometimes give my English students a massive list of challenges and projects to choose from and then tell them to pick five. The structure is simple – they get some real choices and a concrete number of them to accomplish; the execution can be as complex as I make the tasks themselves.

What this all means is that your job as a PBL teacher is to use the essential persuasive power you have as the “teacher” to guide your students into projects in which they learn to teach themselves and explore their interests and passions. Make the structure of school easy for students to grasp and the tasks rich with open-ended complexity.

The “IB” Factor

If you are a school transitioning into an IB program, you would do well to think about a great phrase used to describe Riverstone International School’s program: “We pride ourselves on helping our students become the people they are supposed to be.” An IB program is basically a specific set of curricular and pedagogical structures around a very simple idea: to allow students to pursue individual interests and passions within an atmosphere of encouragement and excellence. Essential questions are fundamentally invitations for students to find their own way within the parameters of those essential questions. This is the essence of an inquiry approach to education, and PBL is the best way I know to invite students to find out who they are supposed to be.

Conclusion:

There are many ways to be a good teacher. There are many ways to be a good PBL teacher. You know you are doing it right if you are leveraging your students’ need to do well in school into opportunities for them to be expansive and self-directed.