

Two Pathways to Getting Started in Project Based Learning

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Pathway One: Hero's Choice Project

The Hero's Choice pathway to PBL involves structuring your class ahead of time to allow student choice over the pacing of your already established curriculum. Here are the steps to accomplishing this:

1. Take your curriculum as it exists now and transform it into a series of sequential discovery/activity tasks for your students.
2. Make a chart or poster that shows the sequential tasks as a series of levels that the students can achieve. In the past I have called these "priority levels," but any name will do. (For younger students, I like to use names of vegetables: Carrot Level, Onion Level, etc.)
3. Establish a sign up list and set aside specific classes for presentations of projects to the other members of the class. Presentations of some sort are highly recommended for them to "graduate" to a higher level because they result in better quality work.
4. It is helpful to offer students choices within each level, but it is not required. You can adapt the Hero's Choice approach to any level of exploratory openness you want. (I recommend open-ended project tasks because students will surprise you with their enthusiasm for learning under this structure, but it is also very important for you to be comfortable with the level of choice you are giving your students.)
5. You can adapt the Hero's Choice to whatever philosophy of assessment you want from letting the authentic assessment of presentations suffice to using a rubric and giving grades.
6. Be prepared to be ignored. As rewarding as it is, when your students take charge of their own learning, it can be very challenging sometimes to sit back and let it happen!

Pathway Two: Essential Questions Method

1. List a few of the many important ways your subject engages with the world outside of school. What are the essential questions? (In other words, what are some essential and intriguing ways in which your subject directly impacts the world today?)
2. Choose one subject engagement, or essential question, that can possibly be creatively presented to your learners as a challenge. This can be an academic examination of the essential question, or a practical experience of the subject engagement.
3. Formulate the challenge as a project. (Decide how much you want to allow for student-generated surprises and modifications.)

4. Now specify how can you support this challenge you have created: What is your “teacher attitude” going to be? What space and materials are needed? How much time?

5. Optional: Think of a clever way to launch the project to generate excitement. (Your confidence in them means everything. Adopt an attitude of curiosity and expectation of being amazed at what the students will find out and do.)

6. After the “launch,” circulate, observe, ask questions, and coach. You may choose to establish periodic rubric-type assessments if your students are new to project based learning and need that type of support. (For best results, use criterion-based check lists, not grades...) Remember – the project is the assessment.

7. Coaching tips: 1. Allow your top students to fly, checking in with them periodically and asking them expanding questions. 2. Encourage your less confident students by helping them to set intermediate goals for themselves, to strive for their ownership over the process no matter how seemingly insignificant their initial steps might be. (Helpful question to ask yourself: As a teacher, do you get more pleasure from providing your students with the specific pleasurable experiences you have had with your subject, or from seeing your students experience your subject in their own way?)

8. Students will feel your sincerity level and will usually reward the degree of your faith in them with a proportionate amount of genuinely creative, thoughtful, and in-depth work. Another helpful question: How do you really feel about relinquishing your teacher-power over directing the day to day specific task decisions? What is your tolerance level for students going off in different directions and having the freedom to guide their own actions? (Remember, there is significant set-up work required for PBL, but ideally the work you do ahead of time allows you to control the parameters under which your students find their own freedom of inquiry.)

9. Many projects call out for presentations, or “exhibitions of learning.” These are important ownership opportunities for the students. Reflection time afterwards is also very valuable – for you as well as your students!