Cultural Connection Through PBL

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For many teachers, assigning projects has been common practice for many years. Tasks have been given to extend classroom teaching with the expectation that the assignment would reinforce curriculum that has already been taught. In keeping with this traditional project model, learning remains teacher driven and, for students, stagnant. Further down the spectrum, Project-based Learning (PBL) shifts the pedagogical paradigm towards active learning, an instructional model where student learning goes beyond passive listening.

The Dynamics of Teaching

The classroom is ever changing. As a result, factors that stimulate student achievement are constantly changing. One could even argue that teachers are unsure of what stimulates some students from the start. Lessons can incorporate the latest trends, whether it is by integrating technology or attempting to link curriculum to current events, yet attempts to make a connection with students are generally "hit-or-miss". What works one year might not work the next, what works for one slot may not work for another on the same day. If students are the experts on what motivates them in the classroom, how can teaching foster learning when students have a passive role in mainstream pedagogy? A dynamic classroom requires dynamic teacher-student roles. Ergo, the roles assigned to teachers and students cannot be universally defined when the frame of reference is not constant. Shifting from teacher-drive to student-centered learning, a pedagogical framework whereby the student is empowered in their own learning, gives a voice to students who would otherwise continue to be unmotivated. Project-based learning can offer a blended solution to student motivation provided an appropriate framework has been established.

A Framework for PBL

Perhaps the most important aspect of successful PBL is ensuring students feel the project is meaningful. Too often projects are assigned as "busy work" or a medium to regurgitate chalk-and-talk notes. By balancing teacher expectations and curriculum outcomes with student choice and interest, students tend to be more receptive of the assigned task and see value in its meaning. The aim of PBL is still to teach the required outcomes but through a task. Students "learn by doing" while still being guided by the teacher who is mindful of timelines, project benchmarks and students on task. PBL assigns the student as captain and the teacher as the knowledgeable first mate. Students are given choice of approach and output while working towards their learning of both course outcomes and added skills that may prove beneficial.

Linking PBL to 21C

While 21st Century Learning does not require the integration of technology, the aim of the 21C framework is to foster the essential skills for student success inside and outside the classroom. Although the 4Cs - communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity - are often identified as the only skills associated with 21st Century Learning, there is also an added emphasis on information, media, and technology skills. Consequently, the framework supports the potential of project-based learning.

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (p21.org), the technology skills emphasized by the framework can be further broken down into three categories:

- *Information literacy* – access, evaluate, manage information

- *Media literacy* – analyze and create media

- *Information/Communications Technology (ICT) literacy* – apply technology effectively

The aforementioned skills become the added bonus of course work. Students learn curriculum and develop their hard skills through the completion of their project, hard skills that are necessary in the 21st Century workplace.

Connecting Culture w/ PBL

Project-Based Learning emphasizing the integration of technology can place a modern twist on traditional projects. For example, by using a digital recording device (as easy as using a voice recorder on a smartphone), an interview activity can quickly become a class-based media artifact project. Remembering of course to connect the project with curriculum outcomes, students can be guided with a meaningful question and given a choice. Students can record and compile a digital database rich in culture, an archive similar to one pieced together by a real-world historian. The project becomes meaningful and task oriented. Students learn both targeted outcomes and necessary skills for success beyond the K-12 system. A simple project, similar to the one mentioned above, teaches students hard skills - data management, file conversion, recording data- and soft skills - communication, collaboration and critical thinking. Depending on the choice of final output, students work to create a combined media project where each group contributes to produce a final digital media artifact representative of the entire class.

PBL, Teacher Comfort, Technology

Ultimately, PBL rollout relies on two primary factors; teacher comfort and curriculum area. First, when offering PBL emphasizing the use of technology, teachers with limited exposure to technology are reluctant to offer these choices as projects. While some base knowledge would be beneficial, there would be no expectation for the teacher to teach their students the hard skills required for each option. For example, a teacher offering the

option for students to use animation for a final output of their required project is not required to teach the skills to complete said output. Students are given the option based on their interest and experience and therefore would be encouraged to select an option based on their individual skillsets. Second, there are some limitations to where project-based learning would benefit teaching and learning. Not all curriculum areas would benefit from a PBL approach, especially those with evaluations still dependent on traditional methods of evaluation such as standardized tests and common pen-and-paper assessments.

Integrating project-based learning requires a solid knowledge of the curriculum and the vision to link meaningful projects to specific outcomes. Establishing a framework for PBL takes time and a firm timeline with set benchmarks. While project work, at times, may seem unstructured, curriculum driven PBL is built on a firm foundation with clear expectations for both students and teachers. In the end, students complete their respective projects and retain the content because the project is theirs – in design and completion.