

# Getting Started With Project-Based Learning (Hint: Don't Go Crazy)

By Andrew Miller (Edutopia) August 6, 2012

Before the start of the school year, many of us want to use the remaining weeks of summer to learn some new skills -- such as project-based learning (PBL). One of the things we stress for new PBL practitioners is, as I say, "don't go crazy." It's easy to go "too big" when you first start PBL. I have heard from many teachers new to PBL that a large, eight-week integrated project was a mistake. So how do you start PBL in ways that will ensure your success as a learner and teacher? Here are a few tips to consider.

## Start Small

As I said, "Don't go crazy!" Instead of targeting a million standards, focus on a few power standards. Concentrate the learning on one subject rather than multiple disciplines. PBL emphasizes in-depth inquiry over coverage. Leverage this principle in designing your first PBL project. Make sure that project won't take more than two to three weeks. Instead of doing real-life fieldwork, consider having the learning occur in the classroom. Ensure authenticity and public audience, but keep it focused.

## Plan Now

One of the challenges of PBL, but also one of the joys, is the planning process. In PBL, you plan upfront. By using the backwards design process, you can effectively map out a project that's ready to go in the classroom. Once you plan it, you're free to differentiate instruction and meet the immediate needs of your students rather than being in permanent crisis-mode trying to figure what will happen tomorrow.

## Limited Technology

We love technology, but sometimes we get too "tech happy." When first doing PBL, you should focus on mastering the design and implementation process; technology is another layer to the work that can complicate things. If you plan on using technology, stay limited in your choice. As you get begin to master PBL as a teacher, you can then use technology to manage the process. But as a PBL beginner, focus on the PBL process itself.

## Know the Difference Between PBL and Projects

This is the big one! I can't stress this enough! With PBL, the project itself is the learning, not the "dessert" at the end. If you are doing projects in the classroom, you may or may not be doing PBL. In fact, many teachers think they are doing PBL, but are actually doing projects. Again, in PBL you are teaching through the project, not teaching and then doing the project. If you want a quick way to see if you're meeting the essential elements of PBL, I highly recommend the Buck Institute for Education's PBL Project Checklist. It helps to make sure that you are focusing on aspects such as inquiry, voice and choice, and significant content.

**We are all learners, and when we start something new, we start small.** We limit our focus to help us master the bigger thing step by step. Through mastery of manageable goals, you can be well on your way to becoming an advanced PBL practitioner. Since you are learning a new process, your students are learning one as well. They need a manageable experience just as you do! Start your own learning and planning process now in these last remaining weeks of summer so that you have time to unpack what PBL can mean for your teaching, and implement it in a manageable way for you and your students.

# Integration Strategies for PBL

By Andrew Miller (Edutopia) November 29, 2012

This series is about taking your PBL projects "up a notch." I wrote a blog about how to get started (above), but after you get started and are familiar with the benefits of keeping it small and focused, what are some of your next steps? One area where I see teachers taking their PBL projects up a notch is through integration. However, integration is actually quite complicated and includes many levels of implementation. Here are some tips to consider for integrating content areas into your next PBL project.

## Know Your Level of Integration

When you plan your integrated PBL project, consider the following definitions and levels of integration articulated in *Integrated Curriculum*, an ASCD book edited by Heidi Hayes Jacob. When you examine these definitions, you'll realize there are many ways to integrate. Based on structures, you may be able to use only one of these approaches (because, for example, every classroom full of students is different and unique). Once you decide the level of integration, it will affect how many products students will create, and where and when content will be explored.

- **Cross-disciplinary:** Viewing one discipline from the perspective of another; for example, the physics of music and the history of math (Meeth 1978)
- **Multidisciplinary:** The juxtaposition of several disciplines focused on one problem with no direct attempt to integrate (Piaget 1972, Meeth 1978)
- **Pluridisciplinary:** The juxtaposition of disciplines assumed to be more or less related; e.g., math and physics, French and Latin (Piaget 1972)
- **Transdisciplinary:** Beyond the scope of the disciplines; that is, to start with a problem and bring to bear knowledge from the disciplines (Meeth 1978)

## Know Content that Isn't Your Own

As you start to integrate more content, it forces you to look for connections in other content areas, which means that you must be familiar with those areas. This is important not only as you build and create your integrated PBL project, but also in the actual "doing" of the project. Students will come up with questions. This helps students trust that all teachers involved are well-prepared and could help them with any question or need they had.

## It's Gotta Fit

This one is crucial. Oftentimes, teachers try to force integration when the content areas don't seem to match. When team teachers meet, look for connections that make sense and fit nicely. A good integrated PBL project doesn't mean devoting an equal amount of time in each content area, but rather devoting time to connect content areas that align well.

## Limit Products to Target ALL Content Standards

Limit the amount of culminating products and performances that students are producing. Once they create products that synthesize content areas, then they will be forced to examine how those areas connect.

## Meet Frequently As a Team

It is so important to meet as a team, not just through the planning phase of a PBL project, but also as the project unfolds in the classroom. Just as we encourage our students to revise and reflect throughout a PBL project, we as teachers should do the same.