

The Promise of Project-based Learning

Conversations about the state of U.S. education frequently focus on high-stakes testing, accountability, and measuring results to bridge the achievement gap. One thread that seems to be missing from the dialogue, however, is what actually motivates children to learn. I do not mean how we can coerce students into compliance. Rather, I mean what can be done to inspire students to learn about the world around them, capitalizing on their innate curiosity.

Twentieth century educational philosopher John Dewey reasons that “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” Dewey is not alone in his belief that the most effective learning evolves from real-life challenges. The philosophy can be seen in action in Reggio Emilia, a small northern Italian city where municipal preschools are organized around the notion that a child’s natural curiosity should be the keystone of education.

Project-based learning, which Edutopia.com defines as a “dynamic approach to teaching in which students explore real-world problems and challenges, simultaneously developing cross-curriculum skills while working in small collaborative groups,” provides a mechanism to prepare students to confront future challenges that educators cannot possibly conceive or hope to fully comprehend. The method can help educators focus instruction on critical thinking and problem-solving.

Learning in Action

The school I lead in Baltimore, City Neighbors Hamilton Charter School #346, uses project-based learning as a foundation for intellectual growth and enduring knowledge. The approach requires a real-life topic, problem, or issue that is compelling to students—something that will spark imagination, critical thinking and problem-solving. When implemented effectively, project-based learning inspires in students a deeper knowledge of the subject matter, a greater ability to retain and transfer acquired knowledge, as well as increased confidence and self-direction

as students navigate both team-based and independent aspects of their learning.

In action, project-based learning can look different from classroom to classroom. For example, second graders in one class might study birds by observing eggs incubating in the classroom, reading nonfiction text about birds in different habitats, and interviewing invited experts on the subject. Another class lesson might stem from a question about why swimming in Baltimore’s Inner Harbor is ill advised. The subsequent projects might involve taking water samples, interviewing health officials, and launching a campaign to clean up the environmental hazards that have impacted the water. In a third class, students learning about the rainforest might create a scaled model that includes flora and fauna, exhibit mastery of their learning through publishing brochures about the rainforest, and take school-mates on tours of the terrain.

At the middle school level, projects still begin from a real-life question, however the investigation and resulting projects should be developmentally appropriate. For example, seventh graders learning about environmental science might explore the different kinds of plastics recycled in their city, and then use these plastics in constructing objects such as toys or sneakers. The key is capturing and harnessing students’ interests so that skills and concepts are acquired and internalized through the learning that happens while completing the projects, instead of being taught in isolation.

Getting Started

When implementing project-based learning in your school, keep in mind that the approach has its challenges. Successful projects take time, are semi-structured, and require significant student input. These elements require a level of planning and management that might be unfamiliar to your teachers. Project-based learning also requires that teachers relinquish some of the locus of control in the classroom and move into what project-based learning enthusiast and author Suzie Boss calls “the role of a facilitator rather than classroom expert.” Here are a few tips to get started at your school.

- Develop ongoing professional development for teachers and administrators on how to craft questions with students in mind, how to identify the strategies helpful in orchestrating successful projects, as well as how to collaborate across disciplines in order to support the blurring subject matter boundaries.
- Create a support group for interested teachers and provide collaborative planning time.
- Create a forum for students where they can present their end products to a real audience.
- Start small. Project-based learning need not take over every aspect of instruction at its inception.

Project-based learning not only sparks imagination and creativity in students, it also captures the minds of the teachers who support student learning. In providing students with a method to investigate the topics that affect their lives today, we position them to take on tomorrow’s increasingly complex problems from a place of empowerment. And, along the way, those same students become better able to perform on the standardized tests that stand between them and the real world ahead of them. 

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