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Leading New Pedagogy: Project-Based Learning

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on September 22, 2015 7:00 AM | 1 Comment

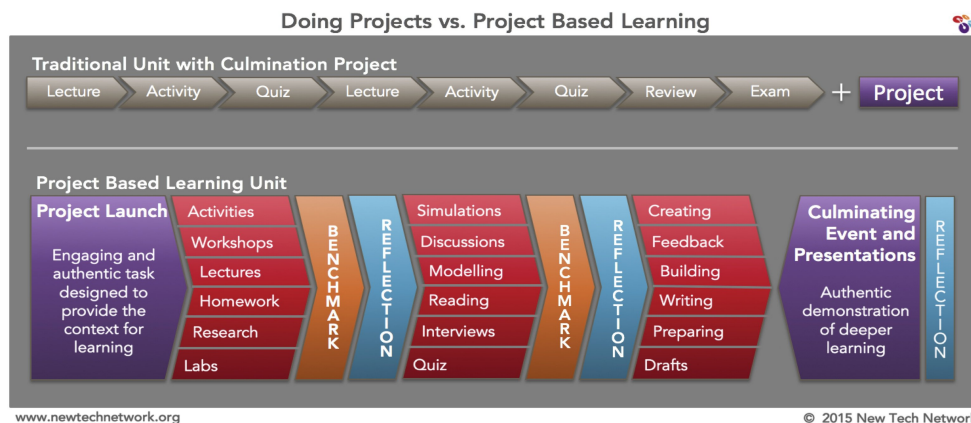
In a recent gathering, K - 12 educators were asked what they thought was essential for an ideal graduate to have, know, and be able to do. What follows are their responses.

- soft skills
 - problem solvers
 - global citizen
 - adaptable
 - reflective
 - compassionate
 - healthy
- collaboration
 - critical thinker
 - effective communicator
 - discerning readers
 - nice
 - forward thinking
 - continually learning
- perseverance
 - test taker
 - math skills
 - happy and connected
 - thoughtful
 - enthusiastic
 - tech and information literacy

The curious, but not surprising, thing about their responses is that with the exception of "math skills" the 21 attributes that they offered are attributes that transcend subjects. And actually, math skills are important problem solving skills. So, it is safe to say all the attributes listed transcend subject based learning.

The response took little reflection time. The educators knew right away, with little hesitation, what they valued for their students. These are the reasons educators come to work; not only to teach "subjects" but to teach learning for the present and for the futures of their students. Leaders are the ones with their hands on the doors that can be opened for teachers to create an environment where these attributes are developed, nurtured, and embedded in learning throughout the school.

One door is the doorway into **Project Based Learning**. Be alert, however, PBL is not an activity after the learning has taken place. **PBL is the way learning takes place**. Often educators think of bringing students together to "do a project" after much of the traditional teaching has taken place. [NewTechNetwork.com](http://www.newtechnetwork.com), a rich resource for PBL, describes a **project launch** in this illustration.



Traditional teaching and learning fall away as these processes provide the route to those 21 identified learning behaviors. PBL provides embedded opportunities for collaboration, ethical decisions, problem solving, creativity, communication, critical thinking, perseverance, and so on.

Changing the way teaching and learning takes place requires learning for teachers and leaders and support from the teachers and the leaders both. It is a heavy lift. Support has to be ongoing and it has to be informed. No more one-shot in-service sessions for teachers where leaders walk through to offer a nod of approval and encouragement. This change of teaching and learning behaviors requires the serious attention and participation of school leaders. Making connections between the reasons for learning PBL and the 21 attributes those particular educators value is essential.

PBL is not another trend; the value and need for it can be tracked back to John Dewey in the late 1800's.

...Dewey called attention to the "act of thinking" an iterative process whereby students encounter a conceptual or practical obstacle, plan a solution, try it out, and *reflect* upon their results (Knoll as cited in Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss p. 27). It was the teacher's job, Dewey believed, to place just such obstacles in front of students. Effective projects were carried out through a "common enterprise" in which "the teacher becomes a partner in the learning process, guiding students to independently discover meaning within the subject area" (Dewey and Dewey & Small as cited in Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss. p. 27).

The 21st century offers opportunities that have not existed before. Resources like NewTechNetwork.org and The Buck Institute (bie.org) are available and offer a plethora of free resources that can support a move to PBL. But, without leaders understanding and holding the space for this shift in methodology, our graduates, all of our graduates, are less likely to possess the attributes that we all agree students need while they are still with us and for life.

Resources:

Larmer, J., Mergendoller, J., Boss, S. (2015). Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.

PBL illustration used with permission from NewTechNetwork.org

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