PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL): LEARNING BY DOING, LEARNING FOR LIFE

GESTIÓN EDUCATIVA / DISEÑO Y DESARROLLO DE PROGRAMAS

CONTENT

1. OBJECTIVE

An education meant to meet the needs of our learners is also expected to be a continual quest for methodologies that foster the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge that prepares them to successfully face real-life challenges. At the Centro Colombo Americano, not only do we rely on an eighty years' experience to offer high-quality education to our students; we are also well aware of the importance of reviewing our teaching practices, constantly assessing their relevance, and taking action accordingly.

For many years now, we have adopted Project-based Learning (PBL) in the adult programs, as an approach to make teaching and learning more meaningful, purposeful, and memorable. Just to name a few examples, our students have created magazines, position papers, video presentations, interesting inventions, debates, blogs, artistic pieces, infographics, dishes, environmental campaigns, stories, among others.

More recently, in the Kids and Teens Program we have started to transition from Task-based Learning (TBL) to PBL to favor timing and better integration of all the aspects we consider necessary in our classes, apart from the academic content: learning strategies, SEL, 21st Century Skills, assessment, among others.

This initiative started a few years ago in the B2 block of courses and yielded extremely positive results, especially regarding student motivation and engagement, oral skills development, and collaborative skills. PBL has now been included in the curriculum of all the blocks of T courses and will be introduced gradually in PT and K courses.

The implementation of PBL in our curriculum does not only respond to our interest in innovating or giving our classes a differential value. We have also proven it to have multiple advantages for our students' learning process, which will be explored below. This statement intends not only to provide teachers with an understanding of the nature of PBL, but also, of the rationale behind its adoption in our curriculum and the recommended practices to ensure maximized benefit from it.

2. GENERAL GUIDELINES

2.1 PBL and its benefits defined

PBL is believed to have originated in the early 1980s from John Dewey's idea that education is life itself and, therefore, we learn most effectively by doing (1987). So, PBL is essentially based on the concept of practical learning, which makes it a highly meaningful approach since it involves fist-hand experience of creation, collaborative action and practice of social skills and moral concepts. PBL has also been strongly influenced by the communicative approach, which is expected, since developing a project successfully requires teamwork, human interaction and, naturally, effective communication. At the CCA, we view PBL as the frame in which purposeful communication takes place. It gives learners the context and motivation to use the language and skills learned to reach a goal cooperatively.

"We learn by doing. Our world is an ever-changing, practical world that we can only know through action. Or put in other words so familiar that any person with even a peripheral pedagogical knowledge have heard them: Learning by doing."

John Dewey

PBL can be considered a constructivist teaching strategy that involves exploration of knowledge as students work on a project over an extended period of time (Buck Institute for Education, 2017). It can also be viewed purely as teaching based on improving an idea, imagination, planning and editing (Duman & Kuuk, 2018). Miller (2016) goes as far as to suggest that PBL is a teaching strategy that offers English language learners the same opportunity as the native speakers to interact in authentic communication situations.

Moss & Van Duzer (1998) define PBL as "an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop" (p2). And in the solution of said problems or creation of said products, students will necessarily resort to and develop skills such as creativity, critical thinking, decision-making, collaboration, self- study, and other study and 21st Century skills, with which we are already acquainted. Now, here, the role of the context is essential since we are recreating life and preparing student to face it. The presentation of the context and objectives of the project should appear as realistic as possible and the project itself should ideally have visibility and returned impact in such context.
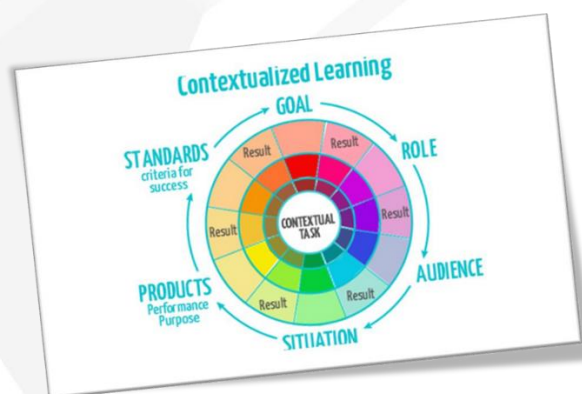
"When learners work in pairs or in teams, they find they need skills to plan, organize, negotiate, make their points, and arrive at a consensus (…) These skills have been identified by learners as important for living successful lives (…) and by employers as necessary in a high-performance workplace

(…). Because of the collaborative nature of project work, development of these skills occurs even among learners at low levels of language proficiency."

Moss & Van Duzer (1998)

But what other criteria define PBL? Katz and Chard (2000) mention criteria such as students' active participation with their opinions about the topics involved in the project; resorting to different digital or physical tools and sources of information; interacting with peers; evaluating; proposing new ideas or products; using the skills acquired in the context of a real and meaningful life; and allowing the learner to solve problems creatively.

Thomas and Mergendoller (2000) also add constructive investigation to this list of criteria. And we consider this element of great importance, since through research, students practice and develop not only academic skills such as reading, vocabulary, listening, etc., but also, other life skills and literacies such as visual, media and information literacy, critical thinking, data analysis and interpretation skills, among others.

Furthermore, Stoller (2006) also includes some key criteria: having a process and product; integrating skills; involving both collaborative and independent work; assigning particular roles to the team members; and facilitating students' learning and understanding of a topic through the integration of language and content.

Finally, the Buck Institute for education (2017) proposes the seven essential project design element model, which points out some aspects that have we have not considered yet and that are key to the success in the design and execution of a project: critique and revision, which could be carried out by the teacher and/or the peers; and a public product, which can be a F2F or online presentation, pre-recorded presentation, a fair exhibition, etc.

As for some additional benefits, research has found PBL improves technological literacy Zhang (2015), student engagement (Abdul Khalek and Lee, 2012) and students' attitude towards the classes, (Bayram & Seloni 2014).

All in all, even though PBL can be defined from various perspectives, we can identify some salient characteristics and benefits among all of them, which make it a very pertinent approach for all our programs at the CCA. It is student-centered; involves collaboration amongst the class members; facilitates the development of all the skills involved in language proficiency through practical communication; fosters meaningful learning through independent exploration and reflection; capitalizes on both the process and the product; and promotes the development of life skills and 21st Century skills learners will find useful in authentic contexts.

3. SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

3.1 The process

Among all the models examined, we selected Papandreou's (1994) and adapted it to our context, since we found it to be the most complete, yet concise, practical, and still valid one.

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1. **Preparation:** The teacher introduces the project and topic to the students and asks them to discuss and ask questions. There is also a space for reflection about expectations and potential benefits of project work.

2. **Planning:** The teacher and the students determine the timeline, objectives, expected outcomes, roles, type of information to collect, format of the outcome and the final presentation, criteria, and types of assessment to be implemented, among other aspects teachers may consider necessary.

3. **Research:** In this part, the students work individually or in groups to gather information from different sources.

4. **Development:** Students compile and analyze the information and develop the project whether it is about solving a problem, creating a digital outcome, creating a new product, writing a paper, launching a campaign, etc. This may take more than one class.

5. **Planning of the presentation:** Teams plan and rehearse for the presentation.

6. **Presentation:** Students are supposed to present their final product to the whole class.

7. **Assessment:** Although assessment, feedback and guidance should take place at various moments during the development of the project, it is necessary to have a final moment to assess the process, the product, learning of academic contents, learning of the subject matter, development of other skills, collaboration, attitudes, among others. .

3.2 Assessing PBL: Principles to ensure success

- Introduce learners to the concepts and practices of self-evaluation and peer evaluation throughout the process and at the end of it. Encourage it purposefully.
- PBL is an ideal scenario to promote collaborative and constructive peer evaluation. Learners can evaluate themselves and each other through role plays, learner-to-learner interviews, and writing activities.
- Students can even identify what should be evaluated and suggest how to do it.
- Teachers can assess skills and knowledge that learners use and the ways they use language during the project.
- Learners can reflect upon their own work and that of their peers, how well the team works, how they feel about their work and progress, and what skills and knowledge they are gaining.

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- Reflecting on work, checking progress, and identifying areas of strength and weakness are part of the learning process.
- Assessment can also be done through small-group discussion with guided questions.
- The ability to identify or label the learning that is taking place builds life-long learning skills.
- For more ideas on tools and best assessment practices, check our banks of assessment, feedback and feedforward ideas.

3.3. Additional Pedagogical Guidelines

- Make sure to formally present the project and hold an initial conversation with students about the timeline, objectives, context, steps, expectations in terms of collaboration, attitude, roles, use of L1 and outcomes. Most importantly, motivate them and promote reflection about the benefits of actively participating in project work. See the steps proposed above. Try to follow them. Again, they are deemed to be a suggested guide.
- Clearly establish the assessment process, criteria, and modalities -e.g., teacher-based, peer or self-assessment – since the beginning of the process.
- The PBL component presented in the syllabi is meant to serve as the suggested guidelines and steps to facilitate our teachers' application of the project in the actual class. However, they can make modifications in terms of the sequence and nature of the steps, the type of outcomes, formats, and activities or lessons that we recommend connecting with the project.
- Bear in mind that, as mentioned above, the project requires students to work on it over an extended period and developed in steps, at various stages. It should not be based on a single task students do at the end of the course, under pressure and without ongoing assessment and guidance.
- Encourage and guide students to explore technological tools, develop and reinforce digital literacy, do research and be as creative as possible.
- Facilitate moments during class time for the group to create their action plans, share findings, assign roles, do problem-solving and decision-making.
- Motivate the use of the target language throughout the process to interact among the team members, read and write; and at the end of it, to present and/or defend their outcomes.

3.4 References

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