Project-Based Learning in the Higher Ed ESL Classroom

By Melanie Fernandes

Having watched the TED Talk *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* by Sir Ken Robinson many times, I asked myself how so much of what he talks about relates to the college classroom and what it is we are really trying to achieve. After showing this video to many of my ESL classes and generating lively discussions, my students and I took away a crucial point: the landscape of employment has shifted drastically with the advent of recent technologies. Consequently, the role of higher education, including ESL education, must shift accordingly to these changes. Although memorization, recall, and knowledge of theory are all still crucial, students must learn how to apply knowledge, collaborate, and think critically in order to be competitive. The more passive teacher-centered classroom is being traded in for the more active student-centered one. Since many fields across the humanities and sciences require the completion of projects with a team of people, Project-Based Learning is a great way to foster the skills needed in order to prepare students for their futures.

What is Project-Based Learning?

John Dewey was a pioneer in what was called "experiential learning" in the early 1900s. Jean Piaget also subscribed to the idea that people learn best by doing. Project-Based Learning is basically the idea of giving students a group task in which they collaborate in order to solve a problem or answer a question. This process involves not only answering that question but taking it a step further by asking students to create a finished product.

Why is Project-Based Learning useful in a college ESL classroom?

One of the most important benefits to PjBL is motivation. This is something we as educators grapple with every day. In my experience, some students have expressed feelings of how ESL classes are "holding them back" and they prefer to just get into their major. Of course, these feelings can lead to struggles with maintaining motivation to learn and with absenteeism.

With this in mind, I tried this PjBL exercise in my intensive English classroom:

Tired of the same routine with learning lists of vocabulary, I divided the class into three groups and gave them each a different type of event to plan. With a class set of iPads (students can also use smart phones), students used an app called Popplet to list items on the food menu as well as find examples of decorations they would use. They also used the iPads to find the names of items they needed to know in English. I also gave them large post-its to draw the layout of their events with tables

and seating. I gave them the entire class period to complete ~~it~~ the assignment and reminded them that they would present this the next day. What I observed upon giving them this project-based task was that their motivation skyrocketed. Students were fully engaged because it was a relevant task that allowed them to create something that they might do in real life. They were excited to learn the words that they needed such as "centerpiece" or "candles." Though these are not typically academic words, they are certainly words that they wanted to learn. And where there's a desire, learning will take place. The possibilities for PjBL are endless.

Think of the ways that you can foster learning through assigning various projects. If you teach writing or listening/speaking, have students observe a free lecture at your institution or online. If the speaker presents a problem during the lecture, have students work together in pairs on problem-solution essays to present to the class. Students can also come up with projects like going out into the community and interviewing people in order to produce an orientation video for new immigrants or international students to help them get adjusted to life here in the US or to the new academic culture. These may be things your college or university can use in the future!

In addition, TED talks can provide excellent content around which to develop project-based assignments. For instance, the following TED Talk by Elora Hardy lends itself well to a myriad of questions that students could research, getting them to think critically. I have listed a few suggestions below that appeal to students in fields such as education, marketing, and engineering. These types of projects could take the entire semester. Students would have to self-regulate in order to stay on task and complete their presentations.

https://www.ted.com/talks/elora_hardy_magical_houses_made_of_bamboo

- What would you teach in a *green school*? Design a curriculum.
- Where in the US could we build bamboo homes? Research an area and create a sales pitch for to potential developers.
- How would you construct a bamboo home with better acoustics?
- You have been tasked to research the costs of bamboo homes to begin construction on a new development in San Diego. Research the area and find out the building costs.
- What kind of sustainable materials are here in this region? Create a pitch for a major real estate developer explaining why it's important to use these materials.

Whether you have a group of education or engineering majors, there are questions you can derive for them that would provide them the opportunity of self-exploration. During the process, students teach themselves the skills and vocabulary within the framework that they are given. Students can go forth and interview other instructors or people in the community in their respective fields in order to point them in the right direction. Once they begin to hear the same key words repeatedly, they will have begun acquiring the vocabulary necessary to help them in their major coursework and eventually their future jobs.

What are other benefits of Project-Based Learning?

Project-Based Learning facilitates the skill set needed for employability. How many job interviews have you been to where the interviewer has asked if you are a "team player"? What potential employers want to know is whether candidates are able to collaborate and cooperate effectively with others. This goes beyond being cordial at the office or organizing this Friday's happy hour. Instead, employers want to know if the jobseekers they interview are willing to get up from their desks and ably get involved in decision-making and problem-solving.

Janice Whatley mentions in her article "Evaluation of a Team Project Based Learning Module for Developing Employability Skills" that "[s]tudents reported a positive experience, and recognized that they had developed employability skills, such as team working, project management and professional skills." Students in Whatley's study also reported their "striving towards deadlines." In addition, their project created a "pseudo-business environment," which promoted professionalism.

The day I gave my ESL classroom this event planning project, I noticed that every student in each group had taken on an important role, whether someone in the group had assigned the roles or whether the group members had just taken specific tasks upon themselves. Either way, things were getting done in equitable distribution. Most group dynamics work this way—the individuals who buy in to the project constantly make sure that each member carries his or her workload, which is part of learning self-regulation.

In addition, in the article, "Self-Regulation and Autonomy in Problem- and Project-Based Learning Environments," Stefanou, et al describes how PjBL reinforces critical thinking and metacognition. Critical thinking is something that we try to instill in our students though it is no easy task as some cultures simply aren't used to thinking this way. According to Stefanou, self-regulated learning is when students have something to show for what they have learned,for example, a finished product as opposed to learning concepts and theories and simply reciting them. Since Project Based Learning is process driven, Stefanou explains that students learn critical thinking as they go through these processes:

> Students who are self-regulated set goals and then choose strategies that they believe will help them achieve those goals. They monitor their progress toward achieving the goals and then evaluate the efficacy of their strategies. …The more real-world, ill-defined, complex, open-ended projects in the PjBL courses appear to have sparked increased higher-level cognitive strategy use among students.

PjBL also entails problem-solving skills because as the students go through the course of completing a project, sometimes more questions or problems arise in order for students to complete their projects successfully. It is through these constant negotiations, assessments, and reassessments that they learn these essential skills for future employment.

Good leadership is hard to find among potential employees who have no prior employment. PjBL provides a way for students to show themselves that they are able to step into the role when needed. Since the projects are done in the safety of academia, there is some room for failure and learning from mistakes. There is also room for the instructor to observe the groups in class or meet with the groups, see how synergistic the group dynamic is, and give the students more guidance so that they can correct mistakes in the process and work toward a successful outcome. If each student has a role where he or she is the "expert" in one aspect of the project, then each one reaps the benefit of having developed leadership skills. This in turn, builds confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of accomplishment. By the end of the semester, having a successful portfolio and recommendations from instructors will give students the competitive edge they need.

What are the drawbacks of PjBL?

There are various reasons why some instructors are reluctant to try Project-Based Learning. Some have perhaps tried it and experienced drawbacks such as student absenteeism, various levels of participation within the groups, or clashes in personality. As far as absenteeism is concerned, if students are reminded that their processes are just as important as the end result and that their grades usually reflect their attendance, they will be more apt to push themselves to prepare and show up for class.

Conflict or resentment based on perceived unequal participation can be a challenging student issue for the teacher to navigate. I often remind my students that, just as in the real world, when someone calls in sick to work, the team still has to finish the work one way or another. There's never an acceptable excuse why a work project cannot been completed by the deadline. Similarly, students should be held accountable for lack of attendance, of participation, and of a finished product. In a college setting, however, it can often be tricky for students to schedule time with their classmates outside of class. One way to ease their anxiety would be to show them some online websites that they can use to manage their projects and collaborate with their classmates without having to get together. All of the Google Docs products allow for collaboration and communication with their built-in chat, etc. It's simply a question of logging in—no more excuses! Finally, showing empathy to hard working students can help boost morale. For example, you can tell such conscientious students that you can see them doing more than their share of the work and that you are aware of the lack of equity. This empathy can help increase motivation and distill conflict and ill-will.

While observing the students in my class who worked on the event planning project, I broke them up according to their personalities and English language ability. There was an older gentleman in the class who often tried to dominate the class and my attention in order to suit his needs, so I put him with some other students who were very respectful yet strong, and they worked well with him. Instead of clashing, they simply asked him nicely to take on a certain task, which he did without protest. Instructors know their students just as managers may know their team members and can assign students according to their personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. However, the students once in their groups are in charge of organizing themselves, which teaches them how to self-regulate. I remind

students of how the real world works whenever they complain about others not pulling their weight within the group. In my case, I have been lucky in the places where I've worked to have wonderful colleagues. Upon completing my own group projects with these wonderful individuals, I have found that mutual respect, trust, and kindness go a long way. We can do students a great service by providing them the environment in which they can learn professionalism and decorum.

When next semester starts, survey your students to find out their majors. Once you have that list, you can generate project ideas that will help your students become more motivated critical thinkers and problem solvers who have the skills potential employers are seeking.

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