



MAKE LEARNING PURPOSEFUL

By Karen Primavera

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Abstract: Teachers constantly struggle to get students actively engaged and invested in their own learning. It can be even more difficult to engage those students in critical thinking and 21st century skills. Problem-based learning (PBL) provides a student-led format with real-life learning experiences, offering a purpose for instruction. By relinquishing control and allowing students to become more involved in their own learning, the teacher is able to become more of a facilitator or guide. Students learn to communicate effectively, take responsibility, and set goals with problem-based learning. If all components of PBL cannot be implemented in the classroom due to time or other factors, choice can still be implemented. Research shows that student choice is one of the largest contributors to student engagement. Because of this, students who are given choice and authentic learning opportunities are more likely to recognize the value and purpose of learning.

Keywords: student choice, authentic learning, problem-based learning, inquiry, engagement

“Why do we have to do this?” “When will I ever use this in real life?” As educators, we’ve been faced with these questions at some point, and, to a certain extent, we can’t blame students. Students want to know that there is a purpose for the lesson.

Many educators already feel as if they are being pulled in different directions and struggle to find the time to meet all of the demands they are faced with. English language arts teachers are required to read certain novels in class, cover all of the standards, and prepare students for standardized tests. Still, it’s important to find opportunities for student choice, student-led learning, and authentic learning.

Educational guru Robert Marzano has demonstrated through research that when students are given a choice, then effort, performance, and learning increase (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018). Hanover Research (2014) even shows that students who were given a choice in their learning showed improvement on standardized tests.

As a teacher, I felt as if I should be the one holding all of the answers and making all of the decisions. I had to learn to get past that. I would hate to think that my students’ learning is limited to my knowledge. When I allow students to make choices, problem-solve, research, and come to conclusions on their own, I am able to guide them in their learning, but they are not limited dependent on my knowledge. Students are conditioned to rely on the teacher for information, but in the post-high school world, students must learn to find information and answers on their own, not wait for

information to be given to them. Also, learning is more meaningful and more impactful when people figure out things for themselves.

Educational author and speaker Alfie Kohn (1993) said, “The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions” (p. 19). Allowing students to research, problem-solve, and figure out things together in class will improve their critical thinking skills. It can be difficult to get students to that level of learning, but when we give them more responsibility in making decisions instead of just following directions, we are equipping them with those 21st century skills that they will likely need in the workplace.

Problem-based learning (also project-based learning) (PBL) is an effective way to incorporate student choice and voice, inquiry-based learning, and authentic learning experiences while teaching 21st century skills. Students take more ownership in their learning with PBL as they are responsible for choosing their own topics, researching those topics, and finding their own information. They must ask questions, form opinions, and challenge one another’s opinions. They must also defend their opinions and communicate effectively with their team to reach a consensus.

Because PBL is a more student-led approach, it is important that expectations are communicated clearly throughout the process with calendars, rubrics, and checkpoints. Mistakes will be made along the way, but that’s okay. Students learn by doing in the PBL process. Teachers provide students with the necessary instruction as they need it, and sometimes as students ask for it. It’s a good time to stop and do a minilesson over a necessary skill when students recognize that they need help with that skill. By providing reflection time at the end, students get the chance to verbalize what they learned during the process, the parts they struggled with the most, and what they might do differently next time.

The essential elements of PBL ensure that it is more than a fun project. It’s engaging, covers a significant amount of content, and allows students to be more responsible for their learning, which enables the teacher to become more of a facilitator. According to the Buck Institute for Education (as cited in Zuniga & Cooper, 2016), the essential elements of PBL are:

- significant content
- twenty-first century skills
- in-depth inquiry
- driving question
- need to know
- voice and choice
- critique and reflection
- public audience

One of the essential elements of PBL is 21st century skills. These skills are important in preparing students for the future, but they are hard to teach in seclusion. Twenty-first century skills include critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, technology/media literacy, leadership, and work ethic. PBL encompasses all of these skills, and in an authentic way. When participating in PBL, students must learn to work together, share responsibility, communicate effectively, and hold one another—and themselves—accountable.

Twenty-first century skills are becoming more and more necessary. However, we may not be preparing our students sufficiently, despite our best efforts in the classroom. According to EdSurge, a leading education news organization, “Too much technology is still used to replace routine tasks rather than turbo-charging the experience



of learning” (Boss, 2019, para. 14). As educators, we have to look closely at the strategies we are using in our classrooms and evaluate whether we are actually helping our students to implement 21st century skills or just requiring them to use a computer to complete certain routine tasks.

In keeping with these essential elements, the lesson should be launched with a driving question that guides the research and direction of the work. It is a central question that students will revisit throughout the process (Davis, 2016). After the lesson launch, students make a list of skills that will be needed to complete the project, dividing them into “knows” and “need to knows” (see Figure 1). The activities that students know how to do belong in the “knows” column, and activities that require instruction or investigation belong in the “need to knows” column. The chart can serve as a checklist throughout the project.

Knows	Need to Knows
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An oppressed country must be researched (non-domestic) Must form an opinion—moral obligation? Should the U.S. help/intervene? Construct and type research paper in MLA Persuasive strategies/rhetorical appeals To be completed in teams and individually 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we use note cards for research? What is a source card? How do I correctly type an outline for my research paper? How do I correctly include parenthetical/in-text citations? How do I type a Works Cited page in MLA format with hanging indentions?

Figure 1. Example of “Knows and Need to Knows” Chart for *Animal Farm* PBL.

It can be easier to see how all the elements of PBL come together through specific examples. It’s important to remember that the projects don’t have to be perfect. Trying new things, learning from mishaps, and adjusting while proceeding provide an environment that fosters these learning experiences for students. Here are some of the project-based learning lessons I used in my classroom that covered all of the elements of PBL and 21st century skills:

Animal Farm Humanitarian Project

This was one of my favorite PBLs because of the classroom conversations and debates that it generated. This ninth grade ELA lesson allowed students to explore possibilities and expand their knowledge, well beyond what they would have gained by listening to a lecture. The amount of student-led learning that took place prompted me into the role of facilitator and forced me to become comfortable admitting that I don’t know everything. Critical thinking and collaboration were at the forefront of this lesson and are necessary skills for students who are typically do not respond to a lecture presentation.

After reading *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 2004), students were asked to consider the driving question “Does the United States have a moral obligation to intervene in social injustices around the world?” To launch this PBL, we watched a series of short video clips showing current or recent rebellions happening around the world (see Resources). Students immediately began to find similarities between current situations, *Animal Farm*, and the Russian Revolution, making the book more relevant. Students were assigned to groups of four and were allowed to choose the oppressed country that they wanted to research. Although the groups were selected for them, students were given “voice and choice” in the selection of their country. As a class, we made a list of “knows” and “need to knows” in order to make sure students understood everything that was

required of them as well as the things that they knew would require research or explicit instruction from the teacher. This list can be displayed in the classroom and used as a checklist throughout the project.

Research was conducted both individually and in groups, but students were required to write their own research paper. The research paper is a great example of student-led learning, as students selected a country/topic of interest and did their own research but were given guidance and support from the teacher and their team as needed. Minilessons were provided for challenges such as in-text citations, the works cited page, locating information, and identifying reliable sources.

Students were given a calendar with checkpoints to help them stay on track (see Figure 2). For younger students or students who are not familiar with the PBL process, the teacher may provide a little more guidance to help students complete responsibilities on time.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Key: AF: <i>Animal Farm</i> (S) summative assessment (F) formative assessment		Launch AF project: Knows and NTK Assign: Teams and strategy.				
	AF test: 9	10	AF research: 11	AF research: 12	AF research: 13	
		Checkpoint 1: Note card due (F) AF type research paper: MLA	17	AF type research paper: MLA	18	19
No school	16			Checkpoint 2: Outlines due (Type) (F) AF type research paper and works cited page.	19	20
	Work day: editing and revising research paper.	23	24	25	26	27
	Work day	30	31	1	2	3
	6	7	8	9	10	
	13	14	15	16	17	17

Figure 2. Example of *Animal Farm* PBL Calendar with Checkpoints.

My freshmen were new to PBL, so along with a calendar and a rubric, I would put a “To Stay on Track Today” list on the board to remind students of their checkpoints and make sure they didn’t fall too far behind (see Figure 3).

TO STAY ON TRACK TODAY (1/24):

- Decide where your team stands on U.S. intervention.
- As a team, get started on the script and visual presentation.
- Identify examples of rhetorical appeals that you can use in your presentation.

Remember:

State the driving question and where your team stands on the issue first. What is the purpose of the presentation?

Figure 3. Example of *Animal Farm* “To Stay on Track Today” Reminder.

A daily work log and a contract are necessary tools to help students manage their time and hold one another accountable. Students kept their work logs and contracts in a folder that they would pick

up at the start of class and return at the end of class each day. All members of each team agreed on a contract containing certain rules and norms that would be followed in order to be productive. On the work log, students documented work accomplished by each student that day and any pending tasks along with their due dates. After the completion and the presentation of the PBL, students are asked to reflectively write about their learning throughout the process.

To Kill a Mockingbird Anti-Discrimination Public Service Announcement

In this PBL, students were asked the driving question “How can discrimination in its various forms and places be solved in our current society?” They were tasked with identifying a type of discrimination evident in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1988) and in order to respond to the driving question, researched the history and progress made against that type of discrimination. Students researched people who had stood for justice and worked to eliminate this type of discrimination and events that brought about improvement and education. This required an understanding of the book, its themes, and its characters, and it required students to research and make decisions as a team.

Students were also required to display a certain level of technological knowledge, and many students had to help one another or figure it out on their own, which is part of the PBL process. Communicating effectively to learn new technology skills together provides students opportunities to improve 21st century skills. Specific instructions were not given for the public service announcement (PSA) part of the lesson except for a time limit and an expectation of its effect on ethics, emotions, and logic. Students had to research PSAs in order to understand what makes one effective and to successfully create their own. Aspects of the PBL identified as “need to knows” beforehand may be explicitly taught in class or they may be learned through teamwork and discovery. This project required sensitivity regarding discrimination and thoughtfulness in how the issue was addressed within a public service announcement.

Newsletter

The bi-monthly newsletter was challenging and felt like a real job for all involved. Students had deadlines to meet and responsibilities for which they were held accountable. They were given jobs, such as photography, formatting, and peer editing, and an editor was assigned for the year. If that person was unable to handle the responsibility and meet deadlines, another editor was chosen.

We carried on with the regular curriculum but took a few days each grading period to work on the newsletter in class. The newsletter was shared with parents and businesses throughout the community every other month, giving students a public audience. The authentic purpose of the newsletter caused students to take the endeavor seriously and they produced a better product as a result.

Non-PBL Examples of Student Choice and Authentic Experiences

Time can be an issue for teachers, whether it’s finding the time to plan for PBL or the time to actually implement PBL in the classroom. In these situations, it’s still helpful to include student choice and authentic experiences when possible, even if the activities do not encompass the complete process of PBL. Activities that require less class time and prep time are easier to implement into your curriculum and can be a great place to start before fully

implementing PBL. Here are some examples of student-led learning activities.

“My Morrie” Personal Essay

This is an example of how students used the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom (2002) as a model text and then wrote their own memoirs. Students were asked to choose a person who was their “Morrie,” someone who had a positive influence on them. After interviewing their “Morrie” to learn more about them, they typed their own memoir. Students gave a copy of their memoir to their “Morrie” when they were finished, who may have been a parent, grandparent, older sibling, or other family member or friend.

Gothic Short Story

In this assignment, students were given choice on the topic and format but were also given certain requirements, such as including specific literary elements. For classes needing more direction, I provided three choices of topics. Providing students with choice gave them a feeling of ownership and creativity. Many students became so engrossed in developing their gothic stories that they worked on them well beyond the due date, writing much more than they were required.

News Article

This creative assignment required students to write a news article through a specific character’s point of view. To do this, students not only had to understand the character, but they also had to understand and incorporate various rhetorical appeals. The activity provided “voice and choice” as students were allowed to choose the *Animal Farm* event for the article, and it provided an opportunity for students to improve 21st century skills through the formatting.

Blogging

We began this unit of study by reading an article explaining the importance of blogging. We then looked at a blog called “Humans of New York” (Stanton, n.d.), which began as a photography project by Brandon Stanton but developed into personal stories as he began interviewing random people on the streets of New York. I wanted students to understand how writing gives them a voice, and blogging is a way of making that voice heard.

Students wrote blogs about themselves and about others, just as the blogger on the streets of New York did. They even wrote a movie review. Sometimes they were given more choice than others, but it





was still a way of providing “voice and choice” by allowing teenagers to express themselves on their own blog site, which provided a public audience.

Independent Reading and Book Talks

One way I tried to provide choice was by giving students choice in reading. It was difficult at times and not always possible. We had certain literature that we were required to cover and that I thought was important to cover, but it is also important for students to find books and stories that they want to read and that they enjoy reading. Providing exposure to a variety of books, student choice in reading, and the time for students to read independently is necessary in helping students develop a love for reading and become lifelong readers (Atwell, 2015). Providing the time for students to read something that they want to read will also help improve their reading skills. Even though it was difficult, a certain amount of time each week was devoted to independently reading a book of choice.

Because it is also important for students to talk about books and have exposure to books, a certain amount of time was dedicated to “book talks” each grading period. Students were given a basic rubric and a time limit to follow. This allowed students the opportunity to reflect on what they had read and provide a short summary and critique of the book for their peers.

For classes requiring more structure and support, students were given choice when possible. This could mean the choice between three fairy tales or the choice between writing prompts. Small steps like these can be taken in order to incorporate “voice and choice” while still maintaining control over much of the content and learning procedures.

Poetry Slam

Another unit in which I incorporated choice was in a poetry unit. I was concerned about participation and engagement, especially for those students who were already difficult to engage. I showed them videos of spoken word poetry to which they could relate. Amanda Gorman’s spoken word poetry recited at the 2021 Presidential Inauguration and Super Bowl (e.g., CNBC Television, 2021) would be great examples for students. We looked at different types of poems together, and then I encouraged them to do the same independently. They could write a poem in the style and on the topic of their choice, modeling it after one of the poems that they had read during the unit and enjoyed.

I invited visitors to our Poetry Slam, including the principal, so that the student readers/performers would have a public audience, decorated the room with a beatnik vibe, and was still worried that students wouldn’t participate or come prepared. But they did.

Students amazed me with the way they shared of themselves with such personal poems. This was a lesson for me: Don’t assume that you must take the lead, giving students no choice and only directions to follow because you think they won’t take responsibility. When provided a safe and positive learning environment, some students may surprise you (Zuniga & Cooper, 2016).

Modernization of Classic Literature

This project was engaging and fun for students, even though it required a lot of work on their part. To get started, they divided themselves into groups, selected a scene from *Romeo & Juliet*, and chose a theme to use in recreating the scene. I gave them scenes and themes from which to choose, but they were also allowed to choose their own.

This project gave students an opportunity to be creative, work together, and come up with a version of their chosen scene that they would perform in front of their peers and teachers. They had to research their chosen theme or time period to make sure that they were depicting it accurately. Students had to write a script as a group, modernizing the chosen scene. Although the activity is missing several of the important elements of PBL, it (and the other activities in this article) can be a stepping stone to implementing PBL in the classroom, containing 21st century skills, inquiry, voice and choice, and a public audience.

One of the most creative adaptations I saw was the fight scene between Sampson, Gregory, and Abram as a cell phone text conversation, which is so relevant today. The whole adaptation was projected as text bubbles on a large screen. No words were actually spoken.

Authentic Learning Experiences and Student Choice Are Key

PBL can also be effective in remote learning and hybrid learning situations. With technology tools such as Google Meet, Docs, and Slides, students can work on documents and presentations together and communicate whether in or out of the classroom. Remote learning through the pandemic has caused many individuals and businesses alike to think outside of the box. Teachers may even consider having students present to a virtual audience, even long after learning takes place face-to-face again.

It's important to consider any opportunities for including more authentic learning experiences, student choice, and any aspects of problem-based learning into daily lessons, even if time doesn't allow for the complete PBL process. However, don't be afraid to fully implement PBL into your classroom. Students will benefit from the requisite critical thinking and 21st century skills.

Many of the activities and ideas shared in this article can be modified for different units, novels, grade levels, or even disciplines in order to help students discover joy in literacy. Our goal is to make learning purposeful so that students are actively engaged and critically thinking. If we create lessons that are more student-led, then we won't limit students based on our personal knowledge and planned agendas.

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Resources

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NBC News's (2014) "'Umbrella Revolution' Protests Sizzle in Hong Kong" <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=recent+revolutions+in+the+world&adlt=strict&view=detail&mid=E23509AB36E72E3711C3E23509AB36E72E3711C3&FORM=VRDGAR>