[Tips for Implementing Project-Based Learning at Your School](https://blog.teacherspayteachers.com/tips-for-implementing-project-based-learning-at-your-school/)

By TpT (Teachers Pay Teachers) Research & Editorial Staff July 28, 2019 post

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As schools seek to prepare students for success in life and the workplace, project-based learning (PBL) is becoming an increasingly popular instructional strategy. In fact, more than 75 percent of the Teachers Pay Teachers (TpT) community said in a recent Facebook and Twitter poll that they incorporate PBL in their classrooms.

But what exactly is PBL? According to PBL Works at the Buck Institute for Education, it’s an instructional practice in which students gain knowledge and skills by working to answer a complex question or solve a problem over a period of time. To get a more concrete idea of what PBL looks like, let’s compare it to what we think of as “traditional” classroom instruction. In a more traditional model, teachers lecture to students on content, give them opportunities to practice what they learn, and eventually conduct a summative assessment in the form of a test, essay, presentation, or something similar. With PBL, however, the learning is done by doing — and that doing is in the form of a long-term project where students are tasked with solving a real-world problem. Here’s one example from [TpT Teacher-Author Linda Burns](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Kinderlit?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839) of what PBL might look like in the classroom: “One class investigated why the rainwater was accumulating in one area of the playground… They researched different solutions, had to do a financial report, raised the funds, and now the school has a new system that stops the water from collecting.”



### **What are the benefits of PBL?**

There are a growing number of studies that demonstrate a positive correlation between PBL and student learning outcomes. According to a research summary from [Buck Institute for Education](http://pblworks.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/FreeBIE_Research_Summary.pdf?_ga=2.193489133.1569051705.1556735866-726175195.1556206700), for instance, PBL has been shown to result in a number of benefits for students, ranging from the increased

development of [21st century learning competencies](http://www.nea.org/tools/52217.htm) to a stronger motivation to learn. In addition, a [study on project-based learning outcomes](https://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/pbis-efficacy-study-y1-outcomes-report-2014_0.pdf) conducted by SRI International indicated that students taught using a project-based inquiry science curriculum substantially outperformed students taught using a traditional science curriculum on post-unit assessments. In looking specifically at how PBL supports 21st century learning goals, [a study conducted by WestEd](https://www.wested.org/resources/effects-of-problem-based-economics-on-high-school-economics-instruction-final-report/) revealed that students were able to demonstrate better problem-solving skills in PBL classes than in more traditional classes and were able to apply what they learned to real-life situations (Finkelstein et al., 2010).

Because of these [and other benefits](https://www.pblworks.org/why-project-based-learning), more and more schools are deciding to try out PBL. However, as we’ve heard from our community, PBL can also be difficult to implement. Some of the biggest hurdles that TpT educators have cited include the lack of formal training and difficulty in assessing student performance. To help, the research and editorial staff at Teachers Pay Teachers drew upon industry research to guide educators looking to apply PBL at their schools. Using [the framework created by PBLWorks](https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl/gold-standard-teaching-practices) as our foundation, we put together some guidelines and instructional strategies for schools to consider as a starting point for implementing PBL in a manageable, sustainable way.

#### **Create and promote a classroom culture for PBL work.**

Creating a school and classroom culture that promotes student independence, open-ended inquiry, teamwork, and attention to detail is an essential part of PBL work. Schools can build a culture for PBL work by co-creating class norms with students, modeling how to think, talk, and give feedback during projects, and similar practices.

Sample PBL Strategy: Use team contracts to help students manage themselves.

Students are more likely to follow the norms of the classroom — especially during group work — when they help set up those norms. Team contracts not only provide support and structure for groups as they work on their projects together, but they also help students work together and resolve issues if they arise. Give students the resources for creating a first draft of their group contract, or use existing templates for them to follow.

**TpT Teacher-Author Tip**﻿

“While it is good to give feedback yourself [during PBL work], it is also good to teach students how to give feedback to each other. This can be difficult for students unless they have been taught how. Some tips include: be specific with your feedback, comment on things that were done well, comment on things that can be actionably worked on, and give recommendations on how to improve.”

— Becca Fanucci of [Science Lessons That Rock](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Science-Lessons-That-Rock/Category/Fun-Labs-150523?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)

#### **Identify outcomes and assessments at the start of PBL planning.**

Assessing PBL can be a challenge because there are so many facets of student performance that teachers need to evaluate during PBL work. While the end product of the project is important, the process by which the students get there is also equally as important. When planning, it’ll be helpful to determine what the learning outcomes of the project will be first and foremost. If it’s one of the first few times you’re doing PBL, consider narrowing the focus of the project to one or two learning standards and the primary subject matter proficiency that students should walk away with. Once you know your learning outcomes, identify the methods of formative and summative assessment that you’ll employ to measure student learning.

| Sample PBL Strategy: Formatively assess during the project and do it often.

As a PBL teacher, it is crucial to not only assess the output of a project, but also the process by which your students get there. Using formative assessments is key to this. To do so, you must ensure that there are points along the way where students are reflecting on their own work, critiquing their peers’ work, and that they are getting feedback from you (or outside experts, if any are involved) to make sure they are on track to meet their learning goals. Examples of how you might formatively assess student work include [gallery walks](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Browse/Search%3Agallery%20walk?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839), self-review, [peer-evaluation forms](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Browse/Search%3Apeer%20review?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839), and reflections. In addition, giving specific and actionable feedback can help students implement your suggestions.

**TpT Teacher-Author Tip**﻿

“Although each PBL is different, for one of mine, I used two types of assessment: daily group member assessment (came to group prepared, cooperated, carried out role, contributed, was respectful) as well as a rubric (plan fits scenario; plan clearly explains; plan includes x, y, and z; presentation uses appropriate media; presentation engages/persuades audience; group members worked well together).”

— [Brenda Kovich](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Brenda-Kovich?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)

#### **Design the PBL problem or scenario.**

When designing a problem or scenario for students to solve during their PBL work, educators should think of a complex issue related to the subject they’re teaching. A good scenario or problem is compelling, open-ended, and encourages higher-level thinking. Once you’ve nailed down what the driving problem or scenario is, you can move on to planning how the project will unfold from start to finish. Allowing for some degree of student voice and choice throughout the project’s duration — whether it’s letting them choose their roles in their groups or the format of their final product — can increase student buy-in and excitement to complete the work.

| Sample PBL Strategy: Renovate a project.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, especially if your school is just starting out with PBL, consider taking advantage of PBL project libraries. If you know of a teacher in your school or in the larger educator community who is already doing PBL successfully, reach out to them asking if they can share one of their projects (along with its planning).

**Teacher Tip**

“Backwards planning! Make sure that the outcome of your student’s learning through PBL is the learning objective(s) you planned for.“

— [*Nita Creekmore*](https://www.instagram.com/loveteachbless/)

#### **Manage student activities during the project.**

Having a wealth of project management tools in your toolbox is important for any teacher doing PBL in their classroom. To help the work flow smoothly, teachers can work with students to organize tasks and schedules, to set checkpoints and deadlines, and to find and use resources.

| Sample PBL Strategy: Set goals for work time.

Help students set and review goals for their project working time in advance. This practice is especially important if you have students who are new to PBL work and have never been given that level of complete ownership. To help set goals, you might have students look back at previous task lists so they can delegate work within groups. You might also give them a rubric that breaks down the project into its component parts, or you might use a starting prompt, such as: “By the end of this project, I will have completed…” Setting goals for work time will not only help students hold themselves accountable, but will also scaffold the process of ownership.

**TpT Teacher-Author Tip**

“My big thing is scaffolding, especially with elementary students. It’s really important to be showing them how to progress the project through things like task lists and graphic organizers for research. Without that support, a lot of students struggle.”

— April Smith of [Performing in Education](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Performing-In-Education?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)

#### **Engage and coach throughout the project.**

The role of a PBL teacher is often that of a coach. This means working closely alongside students as they complete their project, and identifying when they need skill-building, redirection, encouragement, or celebration.

| Sample PBL Strategy: Celebrate the achievements of your students.

Part of a teacher’s job as coach is to reignite students’ interest and enthusiasm in a project — especially during those middle stages where you might notice a slowdown of momentum. One of the things you can do to rebuild excitement and help students get back on their feet is to celebrate the small wins. You might use things like stamps, badges, or even high fives to informally celebrate student work and learning as it happens, such as when a student asks a particularly insightful question. After the project is complete, you might create a memento of some kind — on a classroom wall, in a scrapbook, or online —  to show parents, administrators, colleagues, and other students what was accomplished.

In closing, the most important thing to remember is that shifting your instruction to be more project-based will likely be a little bit of an adjustment for both you and your students. In doing so, however, you will allow your students to take learning into their own hands — under your careful guidance — which will result in them gaining the necessary skills for success in a project-based world.

**TpT Teacher-Author Tip**

“PBL takes on a life of its own. The setup can be intensive, but once I put it in the kids’ hands, I get to sit back and watch what intentional learning looks like… I encourage teachers to start small, maybe with a RAFT (kids choose a Role for a given Audience in a particular Format and on a certain Topic). How students get to the final product is up to them.”

[— Pamela Kranz – Desktop Learning Adventures](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Pamela-Kranz-Desktop-Learning-Adventures?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)

#### **TpT Resources**

Here are a few popular resources that PBL schools can use to get started:

* [End of Year Math Review Project | Plan a Camping Trip Project Based Learning](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/End-of-Year-Math-Review-Project-Plan-a-Camping-Trip-Project-Based-Learning-2724598?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)
* [Invasive Species Project – PBL](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Invasive-Species-Project-PBL-NGSS-MS-LS2-4-MS-LS2-5-1478119?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)
* [La Casa – Spanish Class Dream ‘House Project, Project Based Learning](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/La-Casa-Spanish-Class-Dream-House-Project-Project-Based-Learning-112761?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)
* [PBL Project – Road Trip Project Project Based Learning](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/PBL-Project-Road-Trip-Project-Project-Based-Learning-3680276?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)
* [Project-Based Learning Digital Organizers for Google Classroom Student Kit](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Project-Based-Learning-Digital-Organizers-for-Google-Classroom-Student-Kit-3413687?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)
* [Project Based Learning | Media Literacy](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Project-Based-Learning-Media-Literacy-4247266?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)
* [Transformations PBL, Real World Architect Project](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Transformations-PBL-Real-World-Architect-Project-1948458?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)

#### **Further Reading List**

Want to dive deeper into PBL? Here’s a curated list of the sources that we cited and referred to while writing this piece.

* Finkelstein, N., et al (2010). [Effects of Problem-Based Economics on High School Economics Instruction](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_20104012.pdf). (PDF) (NCEE 2010-4110). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.
* Genareo, Vincent R., and Lyons, Renee. [Problem-Based Learning: Six Steps to Design, Implement, and Assess](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/problem-based-learning-six-steps-to-design-implement-and-assess/). Faculty Focus.
* Gonazales, J. (2016). [Cult of Pedagogy: Project Based Learning: Start Here](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/project-based-learning/).
* Harris, C. J., et al (2014). [Curriculum Materials Make a Difference for Next Generation Science Learning: Results from Year 1 of a Randomized Controlled Trial](https://www.sri.com/sites/default/files/publications/pbis-efficacy-study-y1-outcomes-report-2014_0.pdf). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
* Miller, A. (2011). [Twenty Tips for Managing Project-Based Learning](https://www.edutopia.org/blog/20-tips-pbl-project-based-learning-educators-andrew-miller). Edutopia.
* [PBLWorks](https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl) at the Buck Institute for Education.

If you’re looking for examples of PBL problems and scenarios, check out these websites:

* [Problem-Based Learning at University of Delaware](http://www.udel.edu/inst/resources/sample-problems.html)
* [Problem-Based Learning in Biology](http://capewest.ca/pbl.html)
* [Science PBL](http://stembrowardschools.com/science/science_general/pbl/)

And to see other project-based units, take a look at these resources:

* [TpT’s PBL Resources](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Browse/Search%3Aproject%20based%20learning?utm_source=blog&utm_term=28tpt28b&utm_campaign=Q32019Content839)
* [The Buck Institute’s Project Search](http://bie.org/project_search)
* [High Tech High’s Project Page](http://www.hightechhigh.org/projects/)
* [TeachThought’s Ideas for PBL](http://www.teachthought.com/learning/project-based-learning/a-better-list-of-ideas-for-project-based-learning/)

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