ADAPTING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING FOR
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN MIDDLE-SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES

By

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PROJECT SUMMARY

I have designed a website, Project-Based Learning for All, (https.pbl4all.weebly.com) as a resource for middle school social studies educators to help them adapt Project-Based Learning (PBL) for English-Language Learners (ELLs) and other students. The website is where the theory and strategies that I have researched in this project can be put to use, where I share the rationale for using PBL with struggling readers and also the practical scaffolds that can be used in the design and implementation. In conversations with other educators, I learned that many of them who have not tried it view PBL as difficult to assess, not connected to standards, or too complex for ELLs and other struggling readers to participate in. These are legitimate concerns, but PBL can be assessed, connected to standards, and adapted to suit all learners when teachers have the tools they need to learn to thoughtfully design. By sharing research about the methods and outcomes, I hope to help them learn more about the possibilities of PBL and gain confidence in trying it. I aim to fill a gap in my professional community so that we can reach more students with the advantageous learning experiences they deserve.

I will share strategies to support critical discussion and writing, a resources page, searchable lessons and hands-on project ideas for social studies, as well as links to local, state, and national standards, adapted planning tools and a frequently asked questions page for educators new to implementing PBL. I also designed a survey to assess teacher needs and a searchable index within the website where middle school social studies teachers can share their own PBL ideas, find inspiration and share student outcomes.
The templates, adapted rubrics, and explanations of how language acquisition can be addressed by PBL are the results of my research into most effective teaching strategies for diverse learners, mainly as outlined in GLAD strategies and VTS.
Menu design

HOME  FAQ  STRATEGIES  TEMPLATES  MORE...

EXAMPLES
RESOURCES
PBL DESIGN
Images

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

- John Dewey

Project-Based Learning (PBL) for Middle School English-Language Learners (ELLs)

**Student-driven inquiry** led by essential questions is a powerful means of presenting complex concepts in a few strokes (Bos, 2014). This is most effective when educators support project designs processes with key scaffolds and use solid teaching tools and evaluations customized to be relevant in a particular classroom context.

**Language and conceptual supports** are vital to students who are still building confidence in their academic reading and writing abilities, as well as to their peers who already work at grade level or beyond (Echevarria, 1995).

**Mastery in the middle grades** is not only about understanding content, but also becoming comfortable with intellectual tools and scholarly practices that are new to all students at this grade level. It is not enough to work on the mechanics of language acquisition and hope students persist until the more interesting content arrives. We have to engage them in developmentally appropriate content and activities right now—with supports.
Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

What does this type of interdisciplinary approach look like at its best in the classroom? Innovative, best-practice models are available from collaborations between museums, historical societies and schools. Maxine Greene was an innovator in this area who developed hundreds of teaching approaches to reach students through art and music. Her model connects learning to outcomes in academic, social, and aesthetic areas through interdisciplinary lessons. Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine also developed arts-integrated processes to foster critical thinking in their development of Visual Thinking Strategies, which are in use in AVID classrooms, but can be adapted very well to introduce topics in social studies.

Integrating Technology

Introducing regular classroom collaborations using art and music to teach history should involve using contemporary technology to connect students to peers in class and to the school and parent community. Students experience the relevance of their projects and pride in their work. Social media and classroom website skills are important and engaging to students.

Constructivism

Middle and high schoolers are described by Erikson as inhabiting the “Who am I? Who can I be?” stage of development. The essential sociability and curiosity of the age group make it ideal for introducing teaching that opens, rather than closes doors to possible new identities. The accomplished reader can also learn to plan, collaborate, improvise, and create: the advanced visual thinker can connect to academic learning in history through drawing, collaborating, and examining historic themes critically in discussions. Interdisciplinary PBL allows students to gain mastery while working at the edges of their current understandings.

Social Learning

Social learning precedes development. Learning is a kind of social project that draws out students to engage with each other around content. Roles and routines foster student confidence and allow students to work at the edges of their current understandings in academic conversations with peers.

Connections to Student Experience

Art and music content connects with purpose-driven and multicultural education, especially for students who do not engage with text-intensive content. Links to student experiences through critical thinking/writing/viewing sources other than text lead to improvements in literacy and understanding of social studies content. By designing their own inquiries around culturally-relevant their own essential questions, students honor and advance their current understanding of historical concepts while addressing culturally relevant topics. This is especially important in engaging students who lack confidence as text learners; reading is not the only way to take in content, and writing is not the only way to demonstrate understanding. Students build stronger identities as scholars through practicing inquiry around their own questions which they keep track of in a research journal and use on research and writing workshop days to develop independent projects.

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Students learn in collaboration and apply themselves to creating relevant and visible projects shared with their wider community outside the classroom. In the process, they learn to master new techniques in the visual arts, research, writing, and technology. They can then share their projects to contribute to their school and community, and in the process take ownership of their learning and in communicating its value. Project-based learning relies on the middle schooler’s strengths in social learning to drive their work around authentic student questions. PBL helps students make progress in literacy, language acquisition, independence, critical thinking and writing.
What's this project about?
This site is designed by a secondary social studies teacher as a resource and collaboration page for other educators. Its purpose is to provide scaffolding ideas and lesson templates that make project-based learning (PBL) more available to all learners, especially for struggling readers and English-language learners.

The two big ideas for this site are 1) Integrating language acquisition and literacy to make high-quality PBL more widely accessible to all middle school students, and 2) Connecting PBL to standards for social studies. My work with students has taught me that middle school students at all reading levels have a developmental need for interesting and valuable work, and if we do this work, they will be more engaged.

What is PBL?
Project-based learning (PBL) is an innovative way to engage students to use their own natural curiosity to investigate topics independently and share their research through projects. PBL has been around as long as people have been teaching and learning, but it was a big part of early constructivist and vocational education models of the early 20th century. The big idea is that students' own essential questions should drive their inquiry and lead to meaningful learning that connects them to the real world and makes sense for what they want and need to know. For more information on what PBL is, check out this video from the Buck Institute for Education, the leader in PBL training for educators. Basically, it puts the student in the driver’s seat for their learning, and the main principles are student choice, student perspectives, advanced critical thinking skills, collaboration, and self-accountability.

How can I help students generate topic ideas?
Academic peer conversations can help students generate topic ideas with a little guidance from their teachers. Check out my conversation starters ideas here.

How can I help students create essential questions?
See the essential question assistance page for students at multiple academic levels using sentence starters and vocabulary scaffolds.

How can PBL connect to state and national social studies standards?
See connections to the MN State Standards, U.S. National Standards, the Common Core, and College Career and Civic Life.

How can I support all my students in accessing high-quality PBL?
There are a many scaffolding strategies to support struggling readers, including English-language learners and others (Bos, 2013; BIE, 2017). Teaching lower

How can I support students without digital access online at home?
Help students create a list of places in their neighborhood like public libraries, community centers, and cafes that offer free wifi and share it with their parents. Arrange time for them to research in class or after school. Consider project ideas that are not reliant on digital access, or that are funding proposals for digital access. (adapted from TeachThought.org)

How can I structure research workshop roles and pairings?
See how to structure using routines, roles, groups and teams on the strategies page.
Resources

Journal Articles


Books

Washington, D.C.: NCSS.
Essential Elements of PBL

1) Student Learning Goals
   - Student learning of academic content and skill development
   - Personal learning goals

2) Key Knowledge and Understanding
   - Content standards, concepts, and in-depth understandings
   - Application of knowledge to the real world to solve problems, answer complex questions, and create high-quality products

3) Key Success Skills
   - 21st Century Skills/College and Career Readiness Skills:
     - Critical thinking and problem solving
     - Collaborative work with others
     - Self-management
   - Other habits of mind and work
     - Perseverance
     - Creativity

(BIE, 2018; Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015)
Seven Elements of Gold-Standard PBL Design

1) Challenging Problem or Question

2) Sustained Inquiry

3) Authenticity

4) Student Voice & Choice

5) Reflection

6) Critique & Revision

7) Public Product

(Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015)
Using PBL With Struggling Students

1. Make the activity challenging and the align to standards, but provide enough scaffolding to meet the students where they are. PBL allows for the accommodation of different learning styles through various teaching styles. Instructional strategies: workshops (centers/stations), solo and team assignments, and small group and whole group learning, aligned with state standards. Incorporating these strategies consistently in my teaching yielded 98.5% mastery in achievement on state test scores and 90-95% passage scores in classroom assessments—which included 504 students, many in Special Education.

2. Include collaboration with peers and experts. PBL encourages expert collaboration to give students a deeper understanding of the learning. Students interview community partners and invite experts into the classroom.

3. Use protocols. Protocols ensure students focus and are guided in their project work. Protocols include structured conversations learning activities like research, critiques, and assessments. Students also use the protocol when planning their final presentations (Terrance, 2017).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Purposes</th>
<th>PBL step(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pictorial input chart</td>
<td>Teacher charts chunks of information to introduce the topic, each chunk a different color, 10/2 lecture</td>
<td>Make connections to the topic, build interest, elicit questions, start conversation, begin mind mapping</td>
<td>Challenging problem or question, reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Foundational)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expert groups</td>
<td>One student from each small group joins expert group with teacher, experts read content together, highlight main ideas in mind map, illustrate main ideas, gradual release to let students research</td>
<td>Develop content knowledge, social learning, peer academic conversations</td>
<td>Sustained Inquiry, authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Foundational)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Process grid</td>
<td>Process grid with space for each vocabulary word and main concept in the above mind map, teacher asks class to help fill in main ideas on the grid by conferring with their group members, models first row, and student experts present the rest.</td>
<td>Build peer connections, research skills, iterative learning, ZPD, inviting students to see themselves as experts,</td>
<td>Authenticity, sustained inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Foundational)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cooperative strip paragraph</td>
<td>Teacher models how to create good sentences about main ideas in the lesson using vocabulary and sentence parts on large paper strips, student groups collaborate to create their own sentences and highlight main ideas, whole class puts sentences together to create a paragraph</td>
<td>Model sentence-making grammar and academic vocabulary, model paragraph and relationship to main idea, students practice reading aloud, writing</td>
<td>Sustained Inquiry, reflection, student voice and choice, public product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Foundational)</td>
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</table>
| Cognitive content grid         | Day 1 - Teacher writes content words on grid, says the word aloud, students repeat in chorus, group volunteers definitions and works in small groups to develop definitions they lack. Teacher introduces a gesture or synonym (buzzword) for each vocabulary word  
Day 2 - Student teams share their final meanings for each word, teacher writes final meanings on grid, adds sketch and may offer the word in native language, leads word study, models sentence with each word aloud, teams create own sentence aloud to whole class | Develop research abilities and finding meaning from context clues, collaboration, writing | Authenticity, sustained inquiry, student voice and choice, critique and revision |
| (Foundational)                 |                                                                         |                                                                          |                                                 |

Adapted by the author (GLAD, 2015; Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project or show prints of artwork, play film, show material objects, or play audio.</td>
<td>Works of art can be single or multiple of related topics or time period. Non-abstract works and primary sources are best for most social studies topics.</td>
<td>Notes on student’s own observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask students to look closely and silently at artwork for a few minutes. Instruct them to record just their observations available from using their five senses. No conclusions yet, just evidence gathering.</td>
<td>Let the looking fully occupy the students. Silent thinking is important here and will take some practice. Show them what good note-taking looks like.</td>
<td>Written notes in social studies notebook or graphic organizer on all details of image, artist, year, observations, quick sketch, audio descriptions. The heading can be “observations of (work of art name here).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three questions guide discussion: “What’s going on here?” “What do you see/hear that makes you say that?” “What more can we find?” “What is not represented here?” “What would the opposite of this representation be?”</td>
<td>Give ample time for discussion and then summarize after each question. Do not correct responses unless it’s necessary to continue. Address corrections later during the lesson as needed. Make idea map of the conversation on the board. Take a picture of it and post to classroom site.</td>
<td>Discussion and further written/drawn notes under heading of “conclusions.” Idea map on the board. Picture of idea map on classroom website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing prompt: Prompts: “How would you explain what we just discussed? Pick one aspect.” “Relate these observations to our study of (historical concept or event).”</td>
<td>Writing workshop time. Notebook. 5-30 minutes.</td>
<td>Teacher reviews essays and comments to student in notebook. Points for participation and execution. Rubric is shared with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit activity: “What further questions about this topic do you have?”</td>
<td>Write questions in notebook. 5 minutes</td>
<td>Written questions under heading of “further questions.” Teacher reads from notebooks and addresses questions during the next day’s lesson.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WIDA Can-Do Descriptors

| ELP Level 1: Entering | Level 2 Emerging | ELP Level 3 Developing | ELP Level 4 Expanding | ELP Level 5 Bridging | ELP Level 6 Reaching |

WIDA Can-Do Descriptors address abilities of English-language learners to address the key uses of accounting, explaining, arguing, and discussion expressed in the actions of listening, speaking, reading and writing at all six levels, with Level 6 denoting full fluency (WIDA, 2012).

Build appropriate WIDA levels for each student into their customized PBL rubrics for formative and summative assessments and final projects.
### Sheltered Instruction Routines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target Vocabulary.</strong></td>
<td>Choose a few words vital to the lesson. Define at the beginning of the lesson, and post them prominently for students to see throughout. Add them to the word wall as they are introduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Select a Main Concept.</strong></td>
<td>Summarize chapter or section of content in one or two key concepts. Highlight the main concept, and focus on that for the lesson. Interpret chapter readings in outlines or at Lexile levels as appropriate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create a Context.</strong></td>
<td>Be creative to establish context for the new information: visuals, sketches on an overhead, gestures, real objects, facial expressions, props, manipulatives, bulletin boards, and the like. Show what the text is referring to. Create key student experiences to make meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Make Connections.</strong></td>
<td>Make time and space to invite students to share their own experiences related to the topic. Facilitate this process by asking deeper questions and connecting the students’ comments to the topic in discussion and mind mapping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Check for Understanding.</strong></td>
<td>Repeat, clarify, and elaborate. Check often for understanding by going over target vocabulary and main ideas. Use variety in assessments. Create a safe space for student questions and authentic participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Encourage Student-to-Student Interaction.</strong></td>
<td>Include cooperative activities and projects that pair and group native speakers of English with ELLs in various ways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted by the author (Echevarria, 1995)

Use sheltered instruction techniques to guide grouping routines and one-on-one conferences with students. These check-ins can structure PBL for all students, and need not be restricted to ELLs.
Costa and Bloom Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>COSTA’S</th>
<th>BLOOM’S</th>
<th>VOCABULARY WORDS LEVELS OF THINKING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (OUTPUT)     | Applying Information: Applying and evaluating actions, solutions and connections made in order to predict | Creating: Can the students:  
• Create/generate new ideas, products or points of view  
• Combine ideas/thoughts to develop an innovative idea, solution or way of thinking | Assemble  
Build  
Construct  
Create  
Design  
Make  
Plan  
Produce  
Write |
|              |                                                              | Evaluating: Can the students:  
• Justify a stand or decision  
• Judge the value of an idea, item or technique by creating and applying standards/criteria | Appraise  
Argue  
Check  
Critique  
Defend  
Select  
Generalize  
Hypothesize  
Support  |
|              |                                                              | Applying: Can the students:  
• Use the information in a similar situation  
• Apply learned concepts, strategies, principles and theories in a new way | Carry out  
Choose  
Demonstrate  
Do  
Dramatize  |
|              |                                                              | Understanding: Can the students:  
• Explain ideas or concepts  
• Understand information provided | Classify  
Complete  
Describe  
Discuss |
|              |                                                              | Remembering: Can the students:  
• Recall or remember the information  
• Recognize specific information | Define  
Duplicate  
List |

(Daws & Schiro, 2012)
Use Costa and Bloom to create daily and summative objectives for lessons and final projects that help ELLs achieve outcomes at higher levels.

**Teacher Survey**

1. How much do you use participatory/hands-on activities as part of your history lessons?
   a. Field trips
   b. Guest speakers
   c. Art/music
   d. Sharing projects outside the classroom
   e. Independent research
   f. Debates
   g. Other __________________________

2. How culturally-relevant is your school’s approved social studies curriculum to the students in your classes?

3. Are you familiar with Project-Based Learning (PBL)?
   a. If so, please briefly describe how and if you use it in class.
   b. If not, please rate your interest level in learning more about PBL.

4. Are you familiar with Visual Thinking Strategies?
   a. If so, please briefly describe how you use them in class.
   b. If not, please rate your interest level in introducing content with VTS.

5. Do you observe a difference in student engagement between PBL and text-based lessons?

6. In general, what role does independent research play in your daily lessons?

7. What routines do your students practice that develop cultural literacy?

8. How do you connect independent project work to content objectives and standards?

9. What are the most challenging aspects of using PBL curriculum?

10. What sorts of learners struggle the most with inquiry-based lesson activities?

11. What adaptations have you used to help all students access PBL?

12. What kinds of support do you wish you had to help engage ELLs and struggling readers in PBL?
REFERENCES

**Journal Articles**


**Books**


Irwin, R. (2009). *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees.* University of California Press. 68.


**Online Articles**


**Institutional Authors**


**Images**