

# Project-Based Learning and the Impact it can Make in Social Studies Content

Allyson Shinaver

**Abstract:** The purpose of this manuscript is to explore the benefits of project-based learning (PBL), specifically regarding the content area of social studies. It is important for teachers to understand the benefits of incorporating this method. When students are active in the learning process, they are more engaged and curious. Incorporating project-based learning into the classroom can help make the experience more memorable and in result, help the students achieve the learning objectives. This manuscript will address the benefits of this method and provide real-world examples to use within a classroom.

## Introduction

Walking into school today, Connor was excited for the first time in a long time. Today was the day his class was beginning to present their projects on cultures around the world. His group chose to research Indian culture. Other cultures that were picked to research included the Chinese culture, Peruvian culture, and Ghanaian culture. This all started when Connor's teacher asked the students to think about what influenced their day to day lives and what was important to them. Was their life the same or different from those across the world? She brought up the topic of culture and asked the students to discuss what it meant to them. Then, she asked them to consider what it would be like if they grew up in a different culture. The students were divided into four groups of five students. Each group had to research the important beliefs and values of the culture they chose, what religion they practiced if any, where their culture is represented geographically, and more. Once their research was concluded, they had to pick a popular dish from their culture, design outfits, find music to play during their presentation, and create a decoration that would be commonly found in the household. Connor's group was the first to present. They were all dressed in colorful sashes, made a chicken curry dish, created a model of an elephant as décor, created a soundtrack of popular songs to play, and brought in henna to demonstrate what a henna tattoo looks like. They presented their artifacts as well as the information they found out about their culture. Once they were done presenting, their classmates were open to ask any additional questions they had about that culture to answer. Connor felt like he and his group learned so much by researching and constructing the different elements as a team with little support from the teacher. He was excited to listen and learn about the cultures his classmates chose to research and how they were different from his group.

What is the most memorable experience you had with learning in school? Do you remember the information from a textbook that you had to read? Do you remember the worksheets you had to complete? For some of you, you may remember every detail of your school experience. While for most of you, you may only remember those moments where you were involved in a hands-on activity where you were in charge of your own learning. Personally, I know that my most memorable

moments in school were when I was active in the learning rather than listening to a lecture. Everyone learns in a variety of ways, but when you are engaged and in charge of the process, you will likely take more pride and interest in the work you are doing. Students may thrive in the learning style of visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. In project-based learning, students may be involved in all the learning styles rather than one alone.

There are many students who do not enjoy learning social studies content because it typically means reading a textbook. According to Strauss (2017), a study done in 1982 showed that students were “largely indifferent” or had “negative attitudes” towards social studies (para. 1). She goes on to say that based on what teachers and students say now about social studies, not much has changed (Strauss, 2017). This lack of interest can often lead teachers to let this content area slip through the cracks and focus more on other subjects. It is important for teachers to know that this does not have to be the case. The topic for this paper focuses on project-based learning which allows students to be in charge of the learning, in result creating a more memorable experience and enhancing their learning experience. Knowing how to successfully integrate project-based learning into the classroom can lead to success for not only the teacher, but the students as well. This manuscript will help teachers realize the value of project-based learning as well as how to successfully incorporate it within their own classroom. Project-based learning can be used in all content areas, but for this paper, I will specifically discuss the benefits it can bring regarding the content area of social studies.

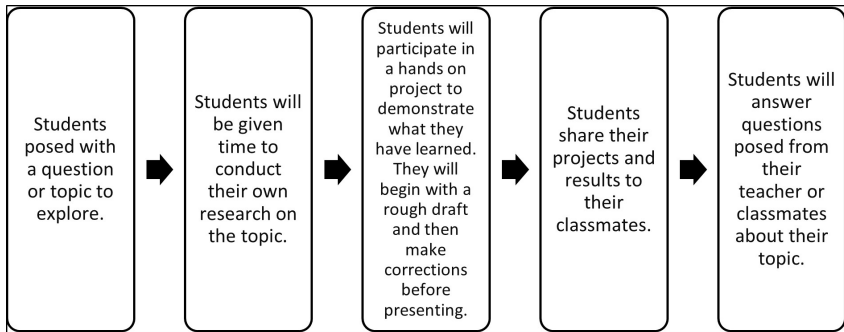
## What is Project-Based Learning?

Project-based learning revolves around the students leading their own educational development. Markedly, in an article published by Buck Institute for Education (2022c), they declare that “project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects” (para. 3). The students are often posed with a question or topic, and then are challenged to think, research, communicate, and present their findings. Unlike traditional projects where students make a PowerPoint or poster at the end, project-based learning involves students creating as they learn. Figure 1 illustrates the process that takes place through project-based learning. The students are in charge, but the teacher is there to offer support or suggestions if needed.

There are several qualities that need to be addressed when students participate in a project-based learning lesson. For instance, Buck Institute for Education (2022) declares there are seven essential project design elements. These seven elements include: a challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and finally, a public product (Buck Institute for Education, 2022b). These elements are crucial to the process, but the main focus should always stay on the students’ learning goals. Regarding teaching a project-based learning lesson, there are also seven practices noted. These teaching practices include: designing and planning, aligning to standards, building the culture, managing the activities, scaffolding student learning, assessing student learning, and finally, engaging and coaching (Buck Institute for Education, 2022c). Just like for the students, the main focus for the teaching practices is the students’ learning goals.

The teacher is there to offer support but ultimately leave the research and creativity up to the students. Once the students present their project, the teacher can assess whether the students were able to meet their learning objectives by the information presented. Students enjoy participating in project-based learning lessons because they have more engaged hearts and minds, deeper learning, have exposure to adults and their careers, learn success skills, build teacher relationships, and get to be creative and often use technology (Buck Institute for Education, 2022c).

Figure 1

*Project Based Learning Process*

## Why is Project-Based Learning Important?

Project-based learning is beneficial in many aspects. For one, it helps students take charge of their own learning. “Project-Based Learning engages students in learning that is deep and long-lasting and inspires for them a love of learning and personal connection to their academic experience” (Buck Institute for Education, 2022d, para. 1). Students are the ones who are doing the exploring and research to find the unanswered questions they have. By allowing students to do their own research, it builds a sense of pride they feel in their work and encourages them to do their best. Project-based learning can also help children learn and adapt to real life situations.

PBL can be transformative for students, especially those furthest from educational opportunity. Now more than ever, we need people who are reading, willing, and able to tackle the challenges of their lives and the world they will inherit- and nothing prepares them better than project-based learning. (Buck Institute for Education, 2022d, para. 3).

In many project-based learning lessons, students work together in groups and have to take each other’s ideas and opinions into consideration. Not only can it improve their group work skills, but depending on the standard, students can learn life skills such as the importance of money, how one person’s actions can change the world, how their vote matters in their government, and more. It enhances the quality of learning because learners are engaged in the process and are using the knowledge they are gaining to make something great out of it. Lastly, it has been shown to increase pass rates. Terada (2021) notes that “in a new gold-standard study of 3,645 students in five school districts, students in project-based learning advanced placement classes outperformed those in traditional advanced placement classes, improv-

ing test pass rates by eight percentage points” (para. 13). This specific article studied the benefits at the AP level. More research would be needed to conclude if it would have the same effects in typical classrooms, but I think the potential is possible.

## **Real World Examples of Project-Based Learning Lessons**

### ***Quilting Your County***

For this project, students are in charge of creating a quilt that represents their city, county, or state. Students have to consider geographical concepts of where buildings and landmarks are located in relation to each other. An example of this can be seen in an article written by Nieberding (2017), where students had to make a quilt of their own county. The students were posed with the questions, “What do we know about our surrounding county? What can we learn using online technologies? How can we show what we learned by making a quilt, and what can we learn about quilting along the way?” (para. 1). Students first researched the historical importance of quilts, how they were used, and what they were used for. Then, each student was each given at least one square (some received two), and coordinates within their county to research. If a student was not familiar with the area they were given, they would consult with other classmates, look it up on Google Earth, and some even went to visit their location. Nieberding (2017) concluded that:

Throughout the course of the project, students negotiated the space between practice-led research and research-led practice. At times they leant toward research as the guiding force-carefully examining the contents of the map squares-and at other times the communal experience of knowledge-building through connecting pieces of fabric guided the learning experience (para. 6).

In other words, this project allowed students to partake in a variety of ways of thinking to construct their quilt. They had to think critically, abstractly, and creatively to create their finished product. Following the essential elements design (Buck Institute for Education, 2017), the students were posed with the question of representing their county, went through the inquiry process of researching how a quilt would qualify for representation, looked up different locations in their county, critiqued their rough draft quilt, and then moved squares to better represent their actual location.

### ***Class Election***

Holding a class election can help students better understand how our government works. A teacher can begin this process by asking children what their previous knowledge is of our government, how elections work, and what public figures are in charge of. The teacher will then declare that they will have an election within their own classroom. Students will begin to brainstorm different public figures that they can have within their classroom to help it run more smoothly. For instance, they could elect a fellow classmate to be the class president to help vocalize the students wants, needs, and concerns. Then, students will be asked to nominate themselves for election if they want to run for the office position. Those who volunteer will

have to create their own campaign, including a slogan and ideas on how they would change the classroom. Students in the class who do not want to run for the election will have to pick a participant who is running and help them with their campaign. As a group, they will be in charge of researching what it takes to run and participate in an election and begin their work of posters and advertising. Once the groups have finished up, they will present their campaign to the class. Once each group has presented, there will be an election. Each student will be allowed to vote only once, and the results will be counted by the teacher. When the winner is announced, they will be in charge of holding that elected position in the class for the remainder of the year. The goal of this lesson is to open up discussions about our own government and elections as well as compare our government and election to other countries and leaders.

### ***Starting a Business***

The planning that goes into starting a business deals a great deal in the area of economics. Students have to understand how to create a product that others would want to buy, as well as weigh the components of cost, production, and profit. They have to consider who their target audience is, where they are going to sell their product, what kind of money and time they will put into advertising, and the many other aspects that go into creating your own business. Buck Institute for Education (2022) gave an example on how a 5th grade class participated in a lesson just like this. I participated in a lesson very similar to this. In my 7th grade social studies class, we were separated into groups. The goal was to create a business where our product being sold was bracelets. Each group got to choose their colors and design as well as decide on a price we would sell our bracelet for. After each group had made their bracelets, all of the 7th graders set up a “business” table in the cafeteria. We had posters with our business name and colors on it. The 8th grade class was each given five “dollars” to spend on bracelets. The goal for the 7th graders was to sell more bracelets than any other group. So, each group had hoped that they had picked colors and a design that appealed to the public, as well as walk around and advertise better than any other group. The group who sold the most bracelets and made the most money won and was deemed as the best business. This lesson taught real world lessons on the value of money, the work it takes to create a business, and how to work together as a group. This project used several elements from the essential project design elements including “posing a question” and “voice and choice” of a product they would want to buy as a consumer, “sustained inquiry” to learn about the different elements that go into creating a business, and finally producing a “public product” as a result (Buck Institute for Education, 2022a, paras 3-8).

### **Opposition to Project-Based Learning**

Although there are many benefits to project-based learning, there are those who oppose its methods. Lombardi (2018) lists concerns from critics including: students not learning all the required material, a lack of time to complete a project with substance, and a lack of consistency on coursework expectations. In other words, teachers and/or parents may think that the amount of time it takes to complete a

project of this nature may create a hole in the material where the students do not get exposed to all the information required. Further, they may think that since the learning and experience is lead primarily by students, there may be students who take advantage of this and do not put in the amount of effort they are capable of.

## Those in Favor of Project-Based Learning

There will never be a one-size-fits-all strategy in teaching. Just like all teaching methods, there will always be room for improvement, however, project-based learning has shown great benefits for learners. Although it is normal for parents and teachers to have concerns about giving students too much freedom, it has been proven how beneficial project-based learning can be within the classroom. Just like every lesson, the questions or topics posed for these assignments and learning standards are picked specifically for the grade level being taught in order to ensure that it is not too difficult for the students to complete. Further, the students may be the one doing the research, but that does not mean the teacher is not there to check their research. If the students misunderstand a concept, the teacher is there to jump in and offer suggestions on how to better represent their data or correct their misinformation. In fact, by allowing students to conduct their own research, they are developing a life skill of double-checking their answers and facts. Also, they are rarely ever conducting these projects independently; they are typically done in a group setting. To diminish the fear of project-based learning, Larmer (2018), declares that “it’s important to note that PBL can work for all students; it should not be reserved for those who have higher levels or who are fluent English speakers” (p. 23). Students are capable of achieving more than some people and parents give them credit for. This style of teaching and learning can be achieved by all children because they are the ones who dictate the level of learning achieved. To further emphasize the benefits, Chen and Yang (2019), declare that results of students who participated in project-based learning assignments showed a medium-to-large increase in students achievement scores. With this in mind, I think the benefits of project-based learning outweigh the concerns raised.

## Conclusion

Project-based learning can be used in every classroom regardless of the content area being taught. As shown in this essay, the possibilities of project-based learning lessons that students can participate in rather than reading a textbook are endless. These project-based learning activities in social studies allows students to make personal connections to content they may have previously saw as boring and helps enhance their overall learning by being engaged in the process. Project-based learning sets students up for success in more ways than one. It helps the students build real life qualities such as learning to work as a team, learn the value of money, the impact their decisions could have on the world, and more. Students show a desire and motivation to complete their assignments to the best of their ability and enjoy the process while working with classmates to create something they are proud of. Therefore, project-based learning lessons should be integrated into every social studies classroom.

## References

- Buck Institute for Education (2022a). *Gold standard PBL: Essential project design elements*. *PBL Works*. <https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl/gold-standard-project-design>
- Buck Institute for Education (2022b). *Gold standard PBL: Project based teaching practices*. *PBL Works*. <https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl/gold-standard-teaching-practices>
- Buck Institute for Education (2022c). *What is PBL? PBL Works*. <https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl>
- Buck Institute for Education (2022d). *Why PBL? PBL Works*. <https://www.pblworks.org/why-project-based-learning>
- Chen, C., & Yang, Y. (2019). Revisiting the effects of project-based learning on students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis investigating moderators. *Educational Research Review*, 26, 71-81. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1747938X19300211>
- Larmer, J. (2018). Project-based learning in social studies. *Social Education*, 82(1), 20-23. <https://www.socialstudies.org/social-education/82/1/project-based-learning-social-studies>
- Lombardi, P. (2018). *Instructional methods, strategies and technologies to meet the needs of all learners*. PB Pressbooks. <https://granite.pressbooks.pub/teachingdiverselearners/>
- Nieberding, W. (n.d.). *Quilting our County: Fusing Research and Art Making in the Classroom*. Stephen F. Austin University. Retrieved from: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1056&context=brightideas>
- Strauss, V. (2017, May 17). *Why so many students hate history-and what to do about it*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/05/17/why-so-many-students-hate-history-and-what-to-do-about-it/>
- Terada, Y. (2021). New research makes a powerful case for PBL. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/new-research-makes-powerful-case-pbl>



### About the Author

My name is Allyson Shinaver. I graduated from the University of Toledo in 2019 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. I am in the process of getting my master's degree in early childhood education. After graduating, I ideally would like to be in a 3rd or 4th grade classroom.