

Overview of the Approaches That Work



Project-Based Learning

The Approach

In project-based learning (PjBL), students gain knowledge by addressing essential questions or lines of inquiry, setting and prioritizing goals, and engaging with real-world, authentic tasks. Project-based units of instruction result in the creation of a product that demonstrates learners' skills and content knowledge (e.g., report, presentation, video, etc.). PjBL units require an array of basic skills and soft skills including communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity and are typically multidisciplinary. The project can be related to building learners' knowledge of community needs, careers or the workplace, or academic subjects (such as social studies, science). Project-based learning is a rigorous and engaging approach that prepares learners for postsecondary and career transitions. Studies have indicated that administrative support and sufficient time are factors that affect the success of PjBL.

The Process

1. Instructor and/or learners identify an essential question or line of inquiry.
2. Instructor shares the project plan and schedule with the learners.
3. Learners collaborate on the tasks associated with the project.
4. Instructor facilitates and monitors progress
5. Learners complete the project and present their work publicly.
6. Instructor and learners assess the project outcomes.
7. Instructor and learners reflect on the project.

An Example

Students in an intermediate ESL class (focusing on the question "How can we help our school community learn about the school garden?") designed and planted a garden one summer with their ESL teacher. Each student created a short video showcasing a few of the vegetables growing in the garden, a recipe they make using at least one vegetable, and an explanation of why the garden was important for the school and students. The videos were made available for viewing. Materials of this project and sample student videos can be found here:

<https://atlasabe.org/resource/our-school-garden/>.

Problem-Based Learning

The Approach

In problem-based learning, complex real-world problems are used as the vehicle to promote student learning of concepts and principles as opposed to direct presentation of facts and concepts. Problem-based learning is a student-centered approach in which students, working in pairs or teams, use procedures that require them to research and think through an authentic problem scenario in order to propose solutions. During the course of the problem-solving process, learners use analytical reasoning and creative thinking skills to consider both solutions and consequences. Instruction based on this approach culminates with students developing written and/or oral presentations that describe their approach to the problem. Research suggests that the approach develops and refines problem-solving skills and helps learners retain the lesson content.

The Process

1. Instructor and/or learners identify a situation they want to address, or the instructor brings in a case study
2. Learners in groups explore the issue and determine what they know about it.
3. Groups identify what they need to know and research to gather the information they need.
4. Instructor facilitates and monitors progress
5. Groups synthesize their research results and identify solutions and consequences.
6. Learners present a solution that represents their best thinking.
7. Instructor and learners evaluate the process and outcomes.

An Example

Learners are provided with the following problem: A family of four is looking for a place to live in (name local city/area). The father has a job at (choose place) and earns (income). The mother has a job at (choose place) and earns (income). They have a 14-year-old son and a 7-year-old daughter who need to start school next week. Their son has diabetes and needs regular medical care. They do not have a car. Where should they live? To make the decision, you will need to consider information about local schools, costs of available housing, public transportation, and healthcare services and prioritize their needs to make the best possible choice. Team members use a cost-of-living website to research the cost of living in their own city and neighboring areas; then, based on their research, determine whether to research locally or in a neighboring area for the services the family needs. Once team members have a solution that meets the families' needs, they create a poster and presentation that details what their solution has to offer the family. A gallery-walk and class vote on the preferred solution culminates learners' work with this problem.



Integrated & Contextualized Instruction

The Approach

In planning integrated and contextualized instruction, the focus is on using relevant content areas as the context for instruction. The contextualized lesson builds content knowledge while simultaneously integrating instruction in—and practice with

- reading and writing skills
- math skills
- language acquisition, and
- soft skills

In integrated instruction, the subject-matter instructor integrates basic skills that learners may need in order to complete a task, such as writing a claim in a science class, or reading primary source material closely in a history class. In contextualized instruction, the basic skills instructor teaches the skills against the backdrop of a meaningful context, e.g., teaching English language skills in the context of career exploration or civic rights and responsibilities.

Research suggests that contextualizing curriculum and instruction has the potential to accelerate the progress of academically unprepared adult learners.

The Process

For the integrated and contextualized approach to be effective, instructors need to conduct needs assessments and interest inventories to know which contexts will be most meaningful to their learners. A contextualized approach also means that the instructor may need to research the skills, language, and materials that learners would authentically use in the context. Collaboration between subject-matter teachers and basic skills teachers can make this process easier.

Example:

An instructor chooses a financial literacy context to teach addition and subtraction of whole numbers. Teams are each assigned a family's set of expenses. Team members collaborate to respond to text-dependent questions asking about total amounts each family spends in different categories. Teams evaluate their assigned family's spending habits and present their suggestions on ways to economize—based on adding and subtracting amounts from the expenses.

