



Becoming an effective facilitator of PBL

Carrying out project-based learning for the very first time will throw up a mountain of challenges that may puzzle even the most experienced of teachers. How do you show learners are making progress? Do you set homework? What about when Ofsted visits?! **Alexis Shea** continues her series with the answers to these questions and more.

So you've decided to try project-based learning (PBL) for yourself. You've run it past management – they've given you the go-ahead – and you've got parents and pupils on board. Your project has been designed and refined, and the children are now in the early stages of planning their outcome. They seem to know what they're doing... Do you?

PBL can be a very rewarding experience, but it also throws up a number of unique challenges – especially when trying it out for the first time. It is important to remember, however, that there is no such thing as perfect PBL. Likewise, there is no such thing as the perfect PBL facilitator. Different facilitators have different strengths, which they can draw upon to best

support learners. The nature of PBL also means that throughout even one project, facilitators will be constantly adjusting their role depending on numerous changeable factors, including the individual learners, the type of project and the various stages of each project.

So how can teachers become effective facilitators of PBL? Clearly, there is no one way. However, there are a number of personal qualities that, when developed in a facilitator, seem to contribute towards successful learning. Concerning challenges particular to PBL, such as covering curriculum content, proving progress to stakeholders and deciding how much freedom to give pupils in managing their own learning, there are a number of possible options – these are considered in the latter part of this article.

So what qualities make a successful facilitator?

In my experience, there are a number of common qualities that have made different PBL facilitators successful. Of course, it would be impossible to create an exhaustive checklist, but working to cultivate these qualities will go a long way to ensuring your pupils get the most out of their PBL experience. What are they?

Knows and cares about learners

A good teacher of PBL will aspire to know all learners well. Even when working with the stress of a busy timetable in a hectic school environment, a good facilitator recognises that all learning starts from the individual learner. They will care about the outcomes that pupils produce and will feel disappointed when a learner seems set on repeating the same mistake. Equally, they will be elated when, after several projects, a pupil turns things around, having finally developed their planning skills, to create a quality project outcome on time for the final exhibition.

Understands the purpose of PBL

It is essential that all people involved in PBL understand why learners carry out projects. Facilitators must be fully aware that the primary aim of projects are to develop independent learning habits over the longer-term. Any misunderstanding about this could result in time focused on the wrong thing – the project outcome, for example, rather than the development of learning habits. Facilitators must always keep in mind that projects are vehicles for pupils to practise learning habits, so their efforts must mainly concentrate on the strategies which develop these lifelong learning competencies, such as learning conversations and pupil reflection.

A sound understanding of the pedagogical theory underpinning PBL is essential – not only to be able to deliver quality PBL learning environments, but also when speaking with people who are unfamiliar with PBL and to whom further explanations of this different style of learning may be required.

An advocate of growth mindset

Not only do excellent facilitators understand the purpose of PBL – they fully embrace it. They champion the philosophy that people can change over time and strongly believe that through careful practice, all pupils, regardless of their starting points, can develop and refine their learning habits.

Facilitators further know the effort required for learners to gradually grow and strengthen new habits. They appreciate that real learning is a slow and unpredictable process, throughout which they must remain confident that the learner will grow and improve with uneven, incremental steps. This is especially important with PBL where, unlike in other subjects, it is not always possible to see visible or immediate progress, because changes take place inside a person, on an emotional and psychological level.

Increasing invisibility

We have established that facilitators must recognise and believe in the goal of PBL to build pupils' learning habits over time. Facilitators must take this further, understanding that the development of learning habits is important to creating independent learners who can cope and thrive in any situation they may encounter throughout their lives. Ultimately then, the aim for the facilitator is to eventually not be needed by the pupils! Accordingly, an effective facilitator needs to be able to stay active in the background as the pupils sit in the driving seat and control how to move their learning forward.

A successful facilitator will be constantly alert, carefully observing each student and collecting information to be able to decide the best course of action. Will they need to intervene as one pupil sits at the back on a computer game instead of researching? If so, what is the best way to intervene and at which point will this be most effective? Should they warn the pupils and keep them at the end of the lesson if the behaviour persists, ready to have a conversation about adult ego states? Or, is this pupil likely to refocus in a few minutes, in which case a question in their reflection diary about time management might be more appropriate?

Trust

The most effective facilitators might rarely look like traditional teachers, who are used to standing at the front of the class, explaining a topic and watching over pupils while they complete a consolidation task. Admittedly, not all lessons in all subjects are like this; however, the difference for PBL facilitators compared to most subject teachers is that they must be able to put their trust in learners to decide the best way to tackle a project. They must be patient, giving learners the chance to work things out for themselves and resisting the temptation to tell pupils how to do things. It is all too easy to give pupils an action plan for a

project, but how will they cope in a real job if they are forever rescued from the messiness of creating something from scratch? A skilled facilitator recognises that there's more value in pupils trying things on their own, flaws and all!

Humility (an awareness of your own unimportance)

Taking this further, the facilitator appreciates that the pupils themselves are the ones best placed to evaluate their progress. Consequently, an effective facilitator co-constructs the learning experience together with the pupils, recognising the impact of autonomy on motivation.

Creativity

Facilitators must be able to design *real* projects that are not only original and appealing to students, but also give each individual the chance to practise the learning habits that they most need to develop. This requires the facilitator to generate lots of exciting ideas, play around with them and combine them until they find an engaging project which accommodates the objectives. In addition, the facilitator will need to think creatively to find solutions to the many unforeseeable challenges that frequently arise!

A well-organised, adept planner

It is not surprising that the most effective facilitators are adept at planning. To support all learners' needs and create engaging projects, facilitators must be able to plan carefully and in detail. They will need to be organised, tracking learning habits throughout numerous projects, which could run over several terms or even years, and using this to inform their planning. They must be able to visualise the outcome of each project and work backwards to register key dates and practicalities, including how to coordinate the assortment of external organisations which are likely to be involved. Each lesson, they must be prepared to support the needs of every pupil in the class who could each be working on different projects, as well as focusing on pupils' different learning habits. In my opinion, lists are essential!

Flexibility

Due to the learner-driven nature of PBL, the outcomes and their method for achievement cannot be predicted. The best facilitators can quickly change their plans to accommodate new ideas and opportunities that arise. Nonetheless, even experienced facilitators



will have to work hard to adapt to the pace in a PBL learning environment. Even when pupils are calmly working on their projects, for the facilitator, it can feel like their head is spinning as they move from reminding one child to stay focused as they rehearse a presentation, to giving feedback to a group that are producing their own song, to advising another learner how best to plan an essay, to looking up how a car engine works with another. It really can be that varied and exciting!

Yet, in my experience, it's in the hectic classrooms where pupils are busily working on the projects that they have designed, and where there is a buzz in the air as the final exhibition draws close, that PBL really thrives. Paradoxically, I believe this frenzied environment is what facilitators find extremely rewarding!

A skilled communicator

Part of being flexible requires facilitators to adapt their role to suit the needs of each new situation that arises. This means being able to communicate in a multitude of different ways, switching modes quickly and seamlessly. Across the course of a project, a facilitator could find themselves:

- negotiating with a pupil as they reflect on their learning habits and set future goals;
- acting as an ambassador to parents and guardians who visit a final exhibition;

- adopting a more strict 'parental' approach with a pupil who has been refusing to focus;
- coaching a Learning Support Assistant on effective learning conversations;
- delivering a last-minute, unanticipated subject-specialist workshop at the request of a group of pupils;
- supporting a guest who has come in to assist a learner;
- and last but not least, explaining the theory behind PBL to an external inspector.

Honest and articulate

If pupils are to make progress with their learning habits, they need to have a clear picture of their own successes and areas for improvement. It can be surprisingly difficult to be honest when discussing learning habits, because they are so much more personal than content in other subjects. Facilitators must

carefully consider how they will communicate with learners, especially where a learner appears to be trying hard but the evidence of them making progress is not immediately apparent. They must encourage students to engage in the process of honest reflection and take ownership of their learning.

This again links to the importance of facilitators demonstrating and actively promoting growth mindsets. Pupils should believe they are lifelong learners and be keen to receive feedback so they can initiate improvements.

Hardworking

It may come as no surprise by this point that facilitators need to be very hardworking. PBL is extremely demanding. I have read articles which have suggested that there's not much planning involved and once the project is



underway, learners do all the work. Indeed, in organisations where PBL merely means carrying out discrete projects to learn a specific subject topic, this may be possible.

However, this cannot be the case with the more enriching style of PBL emphasised in these articles, where the underlying aim is to build learners' character through working on real projects. Outside of lessons, teachers must, like all subject teachers, keep track of the progress learners are making while evaluating both project outcomes and students' learning habits. In addition, rather than planning to cover just one section of the subject content, facilitators need to have an overview of all pupils' projects and prepare in advance how best to support pupils each lesson. During the lesson, a facilitator will always be busy, remaining vigilant over all learners within the class so they can decide whether, when and how best to intervene.

So the top facilitators are certainly hardworking – they get things done efficiently and go the extra mile with the tasks that will have the most impact on learners, such as arranging trips out or visits from external organisations to fully engage learners in real situations.

Loves learning

Finally, the best facilitators of PBL are lifelong learners themselves. They love learning and thrive on helping other people to love learning. They become visibly animated as a project idea gathers momentum, and they are curious to find out about topics they've never come across before. They are forever enthusiastically encouraging learners to think big or try out creative ideas, and they are not fearful of not knowing the answers.

This attitude is also evident in a facilitator's own approach to teaching and learning. They care about helping people to learn in the best ways, so are constantly reading and researching to understand more about how PBL works. They actively seek out other practitioners with whom they can share ideas and discover new approaches. They are also willing to risk trying new things in the classroom – perhaps a new project design that they've come across or allowing learners to design a project from scratch. Undoubtedly, the support of the leadership teams and other staff will be significant to encouraging this attitude, as will allowing staff to experiment in a safe environment where it is acceptable to make mistakes.

The challenges of PBL (and how to deal with them)

Ultimately, if good PBL is simply good learning, a good facilitator is simply a good teacher and therefore demonstrates all the qualities that you would expect of any good classroom practitioner. However, there are still some challenges, specific to PBL, with which most facilitators are likely to contend.

What do you do when Ofsted visits?

There does not appear to be one route to gaining a good Ofsted grading. The benefit of PBL is that it gives pupils the chance to show they can be independent learners. The tricky aspect could be in the more hectic PBL lessons when learners are all engaged in a multitude of different projects. Inspectors are likely to want to see that all learners are engaged in their project, so it is wise to put strategies in place from the very start of your time with a class to ensure you can keep abreast of what learners are doing – for example, training any extra support in the classroom to prompt learners who have been struggling to focus or using 'classroom spies' to help with this!

How do you show that learners are making progress?

You will be able to keep track of the progress that learners have made with individual projects using the success criteria against which to assess the standard of final outcomes. In terms of tracking learning habits, your school will need to establish a shared understanding of the learning habits they believe pupils should develop as they become independent learners. Some schools use Guy Claxton's 4Rs or the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory devised by Bristol University. Establishing a common language for the key learning habits will allow you to create tracking systems, with pupils and staff regularly highlighting which of the habits they have been working on. The benefit of this approach is that it will be quick and easy to see which learning habits a child has been developing. The danger is that this could turn the learning habits into a simple tick-box exercise. It is therefore important to ensure that learners and staff provide descriptive reflections to explain why they have identified specific habits.

How do you make sure that you've covered the curriculum?

It will be possible to link nearly all learning in any project to the curriculum. As you plan out

a project and work through it, you can keep a record of the activities which learners have carried out and cross-reference them wherever they link to different aspects of the national curriculum or exam syllabus.

Is it possible to co-construct projects with pupils when you need to cover specific exam content?

Yes, though you would obviously select the aspects of the syllabus that most lend themselves to independent study. You could develop an enquiry about a particular topic, where learners generate questions that they would like to research. It is likely that these pupil-chosen areas of research would link to the syllabus; however, the role of the teacher would be to ensure that there is opportunity for learners to share their findings, with the teacher sharing anything on the syllabus that has not been covered by the pupils. The pupils could then be assessed using an exam-style test or assignment to ensure that they have a solid knowledge and understanding of every aspect of the topic, which could be transferred to more formal assessments.



How can you communicate with parents about the different style of learning in PBL?

Use every opportunity to remind parents and guardians that PBL is an ongoing process and they should try to encourage their children to keep developing learning habits. When parents and guardians attend final exhibitions, involve them in giving critique on both the project outcomes and the pupils' progress with their learning habits. Encourage parents to carry out reflection activities with their

children. Offer training on the metacognitive approaches that pupils will be introduced to during lessons.

Is it best to have pupils all doing the same project or different projects?

There is no perfect project structure. It depends on the topic for the project and the level of experience of the pupils and the facilitators. Someone new to leading PBL may prefer a more closed project where the final outcome is similar for all pupils. However, if you want to hook a class, you may wish to experiment with giving them freedom over the project outcomes, as this will give learners more ownership and hopefully more motivation.

What do you do when one pupil doesn't want to get involved with a project?

This may provide a good opportunity to introduce some metacognitive ideas to a learner and help them to reflect on the implications of their choices. Ultimately, if they choose to behave as a child who does not want the responsibility that comes with being allowed to make choices about what and how they learn, then those freedoms will be taken away; like in any classroom environment, there will be appropriate consequences. The facilitator must carefully assess the balance of how much freedom to give each individual, considering when best to intervene.

How do you stop learners from arguing during group projects?

It is possible to see arguing as an opportunity for pupils to develop their teamwork and communication skills. While conflict within groups may not appear to demonstrate that learning is taking place, it is important that learners do experience times when it is more difficult to work together with others. It is when such situations arise that the skill of the facilitator really comes to the fore; they must stay alert to the issues occurring within the group and think carefully about whether, when and how to get involved. This will depend on the situation.

Possible ideas include:

- Taking a pause from a project to introduce pupils to active listening skills and giving them chance to practise these. (Paul Ginnis' Learning Listening activity¹ can be a real eye-opener for learners).
- Acting as mediator as a group of pupils talks through the issues they've been having and

encouraging them to generate solutions. Most pupils usually think up sensible suggestions, such as voting on an idea, nominating a leader, creating a task list for each person and so on.

- Make a short film of groups of pupils while they are working and play this back to the learners during the lesson (this is easy to do quickly and simply if you have access to an iPad or equivalent – it's good too if it connects to a projector so the whole class can see it). Initially, the film will be met with laughter and embarrassment. Following this, there is chance to highlight things that learners did to create positive or negative group-work situations, such as if a couple of pupils are off-task and the impact this has on others, if pupils raise their voices, or if one person helps another. In my experience, this can have a big impact, as pupils can see from a distance how the way they behave impacts others.
- If pupils are new to group work, you could designate team roles in advance and give each person a role description.

What if pupils need to leave the room to use the printer or collect resources?

This depends on the rules within your own school and the level of trust you have in pupils. I personally like to assume that pupils will behave responsibly and trust pupils to leave the room if required, just as you would expect of adults in most places of employment. It's obviously important that you know where pupils are and devise your own systems for keeping track of this. With my classes, pupils know to ask a member of staff if they need to go outside the classroom and write their name and what they're doing on a whiteboard by the door. This ensures that not too many pupils leave the class at one time and it is clear where they have gone. If I ever discover that any pupils have abused this trust, (such as on the rare occasion when a pupil has idled away time in the library without working on their project!), just like in any other lesson or in real employment situations, they are required to make up this time and the privilege is taken away in future.

Do you set homework?

Pupils will ideally have a relatively high level of autonomy over a project outcome and how they plan to achieve it, therefore I would generally ask learners to set their own homework at times when it is most relevant to them – for example, they may find there are

specific tasks that must be completed at home, such as interviewing a relative or visiting a local museum or library. Alternatively, you could be strict about learners writing homework in their school planners and handing this into you regularly. Or, you could allow pupils to completely manage their homework, realising that some will shy away from it until the pressure of the final showcase draws near, when they will suddenly have lots to do at home. With this option, it's important for you to encourage learners to complete homework throughout the project and, at the end, to reflect on how they managed their time, setting relevant new targets where needed.

Do you let pupils contact external agencies themselves?

Absolutely! It's amazing how willing most people are to talk to pupils and help them with their learning. Using the telephone and emailing are also important skills that people need in their adult lives, so it's important for pupils to have the chance to practise these skills. Accordingly, some time should be set aside to introduce pupils to accepted etiquettes for contacting a range of people and organisations, using a variety of communication technology. Where possible, link this to work that may have been carried out in English and ICT lessons.

How do you encourage learners to engage in deeper reflection of their learning habits?

Firstly, ensure that pupils understand the purpose of reflection. It can't just be seen as something extra for them to do without them really realising why they are being asked to do it! Ensure they know that the process of reflection will help them to understand their own learning habits and become aware of where and how they could change. Take time to introduce the concept of reflection to learners, sharing famous examples of people who keep diaries and the statistics about self-regulation (such as from John Hattie² and the Education Endowment Foundation³) so that they can see it works. Link the reflection process with growth mindsets, so pupils are aware that it helps to facilitate their ability to grow and make further progress. Each time you ask learners to reflect, remember to reinforce the importance of reflection.

Secondly, ensure that pupils have opportunity to reflect in a variety of ways. For one project, you could ask pupils to write a diary; for another, they could do a video log. Other ideas

include creating a visual journey, contributing to a class blog, or taking weekly photos of a Lego model to which they add annotations. Be creative to keep learners engaged in the reflection process.

Lastly, simply encourage pupils to dig deeper. Don't allow pupils to regurgitate bland learning habits, such as 'I did well because I cooperated'. Ask further questions to find out the specifics: 'How?', 'Exactly what did you do?', 'Describe what you said and how you said it', 'Give me an example of a specific thing you did which demonstrated your cooperation skills'.

How do you teach complicated theories about learning to young children?

I don't believe that it's impossible for even quite young children to grasp many metacognitive concepts, or certainly parts of them. You can approach them in the same way you teach complicated concepts in any subject area – by breaking them down into bite-size chunks. This means you need a thorough understanding of the theory yourself first, so some extra reading might be necessary.

Take Carol Dweck's research on mindsets. If introducing this to learners gradually, you might first explore the core idea that people can improve at anything with effort and link to famous success stories, followed by how people give and receive feedback and how people approach challenges, associating the role that habits and routines may have to play on mindsets, then considering ideas on neuroplasticity. In this way, it is possible to slowly drip-feed pupils with aspects of metacognitive theories and ideas at the times when they are most relevant to the learning and the learners.

How do you cater for 'gifted and talented' learners?

I believe PBL is perfect for encouraging all learners to push themselves and challenge themselves further. Gifted and talented can be quite a narrow term, relating to pupils who excel in 'academic subjects' or in sports and the creative arts (who ironically may find the unfamiliar PBL environment a challenge at first!). In contrast, PBL will expose those learners who don't fit into these neat boxes. One pupil who doesn't normally stand out may shine during group work situations as someone who has built strong negotiation skills. Another pupil might prove to be adept when it comes to organisation.

The great thing about PBL is that the teacher, in the role of a facilitator, can observe how individual pupils progress in a multitude of different areas and constantly encourage them to extend their skills. Hence, the skilled negotiator could further develop their assertive skills by trying to work with those pupils in a class who find it most difficult to get along with each other, and the adept organiser might be encouraged to take on a project management role during a whole-class project.

Facilitators benefit from being able to view the whole pupil across a series of projects, meaning they can assist each child to know how they can extend their mix of learning habits.

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References

1. Ginnis, P. (2002) *The Teacher's Toolkit*. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing. p187.
2. Hattie, J. (2009) *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. Oxford: Routledge.
3. Education Endowment Foundation (2015) *Teaching and Learning Toolkit*. [online] Available at: educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/toolkit-a-z [Accessed 30 June 2015].

Knowledge trails

1. **The essential elements of project-based learning** – All schools approach PBL differently, but there are a number of principles every successful project has in common – what are they? Alexis Shea explains. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/essential-elements-pbl