

Project-Based Learning in Remote Learning Environments

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to discuss how Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a [valuable approach to remote learning](#) and examine the ways in which Project-Based Learning fits well into [Pivot-Ready Learning Models](#). Included in this document are reasons educators should begin or continue the use of Project-Based Learning in their educational contexts and examples of how Project-Based Learning has been working remotely in the field.

Continuity of Learning with Pivot-Ready Instruction and Authentic Assessment

In a time when students are struggling to be present in their own education, both physically and mentally, a proven method to increase motivation and engage students in authentic learning that matters to them is essential. Additionally, encouraging students to have fun with their learning is especially important during these trying times. In a [recent article for Edutopia](#), Amy Nichols cautions educators about getting “so mired in the day-to-day minutiae of making online learning work that you can lose sight of how important fun is to learning. Not only does fun build engagement in remote environments, but it alleviates some of the trauma experienced by kids this year” ([Nichols, 2020](#)). Project-Based Learning can help engage students in authentic learning that is meaningful and also fun.

Already considered an effective instructional and assessment practice for in-person learning, Project-Based Learning is flexible enough to be effective across all learning models. In a [recent article for Green Schools National Network](#), John Larmer of [PBL Works](#) reminds educators of the power of Project-Based Learning and the many reasons the practice lends itself well to pivoting between various learning models without losing momentum.

For one, the authenticity of projects connected to real-world issues provides motivation to students who might otherwise disengage from learning, especially in a newly remote setting. “Students are more likely to stick with an engaging project than complete traditional assignments and lessons delivered online” ([Larmer, 2020](#)). Additionally, since the culture of Project-Based Learning encourages independent student work time, collaboration, and student-driven inquiry, the practice “translates well to at-home learning where the teacher...isn’t able to observe and guide students as frequently as in a brick-and-mortar classroom” ([Larmer, 2020](#)). Finally, connecting with experts and authentic audiences, a fundamental part of Project-Based Learning, can be easier for students when they are already comfortable using technological tools to communicate and collaborate virtually ([Larmer, 2020](#)).

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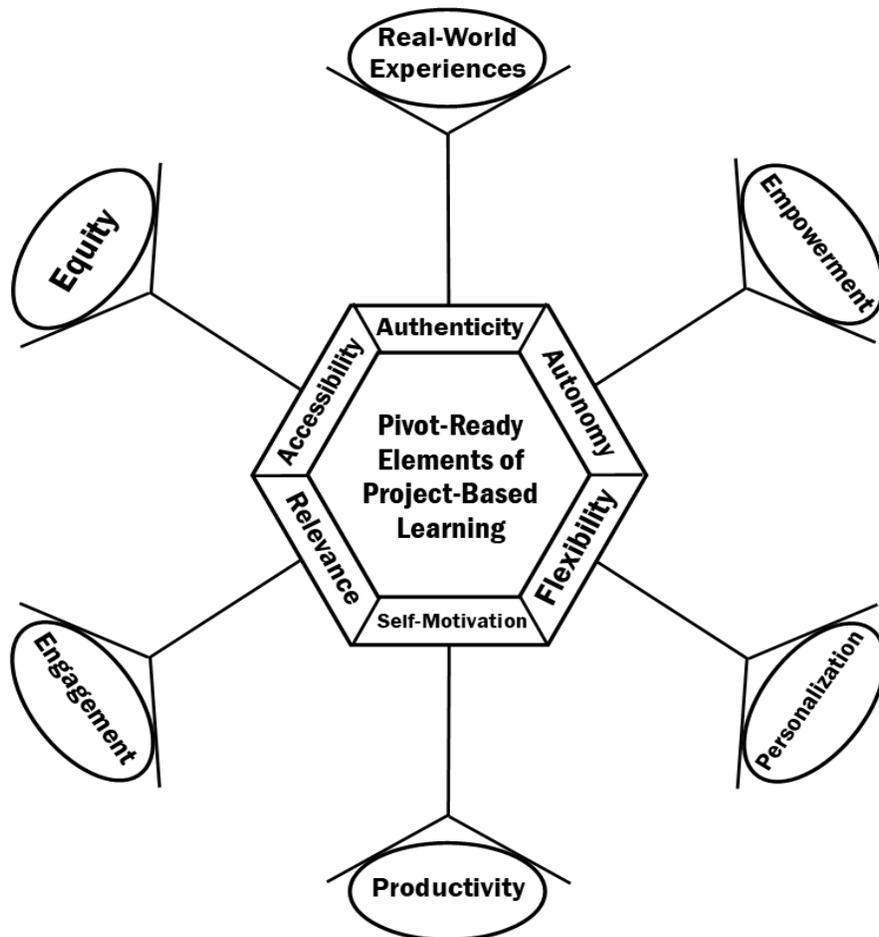
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Larmer closes this article with an acknowledgement that shifting to remote Project-Based Learning may seem challenging, but the result is worth it.

Don't revert to disengaging traditional instruction, even if it might seem easier to do online. Your students will enjoy learning and gain much more by doing meaningful projects. PBL can provide them with ways to process what they're going through, express their emotions and ideas, and feel like they're making a contribution to the pressing problems of our communities and our world today. ([Larmer, 2020](#))

Furthermore, because of the personalized nature of Project-Based Learning, including it as part of a distance learning plan can help make remote learning accessible to all students by alleviating some of the inequities caused by students' differing home circumstances (e.g., access to digital devices, internet access and stability, screen time allowances, and adult support). According to Kay Sturm, Project-Based Learning allows educators to provide students with choices in how they complete assignments ([Sturm, 2020](#)). Additionally, "[I]miting screen time by intentionally planning projects that support students' skill development in diverse ways will not only support their health and wellbeing, but also account for the digital gap" ([Sturm, 2020](#)).

The following diagram illustrates the pivot-ready nature of Project-Based Learning by depicting some of the connections drawn above between specific attributes and the results for students.



Examples

Below are a few examples of Project-Based Learning in a remote environment, including one from Cabot, Vermont. In his article for Green Schools National Network, [Project-Based Learning Can Make Remote Learning More Meaningful](#), John Larmer details some additional examples, as outlined below.

- In Cabot, Vermont, students wrote, directed, and produced a [multi-media musical](#) in an entirely remote learning environment. All rehearsals and filming were done virtually, as was the final performance. The musical incorporated visual and performing arts, as well as video and sound editing and script writing.
- In Boulder, Colorado, a middle school teacher delivered the PBL Works project “[Making Space for Change](#)” remotely. The focus of the project was on environmental sustainability, so students worked with local officials to make public spaces in the community more sustainable. Students used a Twitter hashtag to communicate their progress; Zoom to attend whole class meetings and virtual office hours; Zoom breakout rooms for peer critique; and Flipgrid as an avenue for reflection. The unit culminated in a virtual town hall presentation.
- In Manchester, New Hampshire, an ELL teacher facilitated a project remotely with fourth and fifth graders. In this project, students learned scientific principles by growing plants at home and testing variables such as light, water, and soil. The teacher launched the project with a virtual fieldtrip in which she interviewed a local farmer. She ensured equity of access by dropping off supplies and offering low-tech options.

Conclusion

Because of its authenticity, flexibility, and potential to alleviate inequities of access and address social emotional issues stemming from the pandemic, Project-Based Learning is the natural choice for a pivot-ready practice that will foster continued student engagement and promote deep learning in any learning model.

References

Larmer, John. (2020, September 24). [Project-Based Learning Can Make Remote Learning More Meaningful](#). Green Schools National Network.

Nichols, Amy (2020, November 18). [Using PBL to Boost Online Engagement](#). Edutopia.

[PBL Works](#)

Sturm, Kay (2020, March 23). [Rethinking Distance Learning, and How to Make It Work for All Students](#). PBL Works.