

# Project-Based Learning in Social Studies

John Larmer

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is increasingly popular in K-12 schools, not just in the United States but around the world. It's not going to be one of those education fads that comes and goes; we at the Buck Institute for Education believe it will become a permanent feature of 21st century education. Why? For several reasons.

First and foremost, PBL is a great way to engage students in their learning.<sup>1</sup> Today's students want to learn actively. They're used to getting information online and using tech tools to communicate and collaborate. Sitting in rows of desks listening to a teacher and doing worksheets and textbook assignments is not stimulating, and not how students learn best. This has always been true; if we are being honest—how much do students really remember after the test? Learning-as-memorizing does not match current thinking about how the human brain works. Learning-by-doing, as John Dewey pointed out many years ago and research shows, leads to better retention of knowledge and skills.<sup>2</sup>

As a former high school social studies teacher, let me hasten to respond to any cries of protest some of my lecture-loving colleagues might be uttering. In PBL, students still need to learn content knowledge. There might still be a place for a (brief) lecture during a project, textbooks can still be resources, and a worksheet might sometimes be an appropriate scaffold. But in PBL, these traditional tools are used strategically, and situated in a more motivating context: an engaging and challenging project.

Another reason PBL has gotten educators' attention is that today's standards call for more than teaching factual knowledge and discreet skills. The Common

Core and other recently-adopted state standards ask students to think critically, solve real-world problems, communicate and collaborate with diverse others, and build speaking and listening skills, including how to make a presentation using technology. These kinds of competencies are also called success skills, 21st century skills, and college-and-career readiness skills, and they appear in some form on almost every school and district mission statement today. Compared to most traditional forms of instruction, PBL is one of the most effective ways to build these skills.

There's another argument for PBL that social studies teachers find especially appealing: Projects can connect students and schools with their communities, make history more relevant, and foster democratic citizenship.

I'd add one more point about why PBL is here to stay—it's an enjoyable and rewarding way to teach. A good project not only engages students, it engages teachers too.

## What Project-Based Learning Is and Is Not

PBL has been around for a long time, and it's collected some baggage over the years. Many of us remember “doing projects” when we were in school that were frustrating (“I had to do all the work for my team!”) or not a powerful learning

experience (“My parents helped me build it”). Researchers have found PBL hard to pin down, since it varies greatly and so much depends on the project's effective design and skillful implementation; and the results are sometimes mixed. (Note, however, that research does show that PBL done well is very effective for achieving certain learning outcomes, and either does no harm to or improves traditional test scores.<sup>3</sup>)

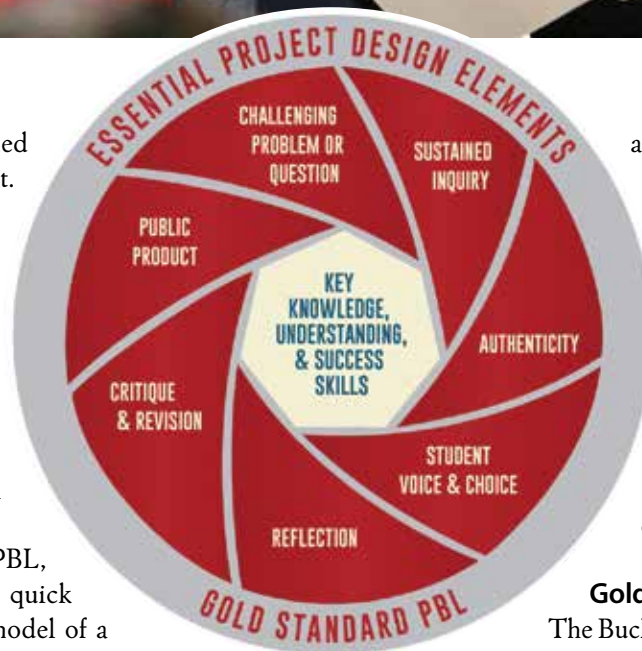
Many of the “projects” teachers assign are not what we would call high-quality PBL. They might be worthwhile, hands-on activities, but they're not a rigorous, in-depth learning experience. Here's a classic example we often use in our professional development workshops for teachers: The California Mission Project. In 4th grade, students learn state history, including the Spanish colonial period and the 21 missions built from San Diego to Sonoma. At some point during the unit, many teachers (fewer today than in former decades) ask students to pick one of the missions and build a model out of cardboard, sugar cubes, Styrofoam—or the kits now sold at Target stores.

Other states have similar commonly-seen “make something” kinds of projects: the Alamo in Texas, the Iroquois village in the Northeast, the Civil War diorama in the South. In other subject areas, from kindergarten to 12th grade, you'll find other examples of what we call “dessert” or “side dish” projects, because they come at the end of a unit or are done alongside it; they are not meant to teach the central content. Think of a poster about a famous inventor, a model



of the solar system, or a costumed dramatization of a historic event. And with PBL's rising prominence, we're now seeing commercial curriculum providers marketing "project-based" materials that resemble these examples. We're not saying these projects are bad, since they may be useful for certain purposes, but they should not be confused with "main course" PBL.

So what does "main course" PBL, done well, look like? Here's a quick example. Instead of building a model of a California mission, what if, at the very beginning of the unit on the Spanish colonial period, the teacher showed students a (mocked up) letter from the Archbishop of Mexico, dated 1818. The letter puts students in the role of advisors who are asked to decide where the 22nd mission ought to be built and what it should be like. They need to make a presentation to the Archbishop in two weeks, demonstrating their knowledge, explaining their rationale, and using visual aids (drawings or, yes, even a model). The letter creates engagement



and generates a lot of student questions about the history, the indigenous tribal people, the geography, and so on, which the teacher can help students answer by steering them to resources or providing lessons. Students learn as much or more than they did in the traditionally-taught unit, and also need to think critically, collaborate, communicate, and be creative.

### Gold Standard PBL

The Buck Institute for Education developed a model for "Gold Standard PBL"<sup>4</sup> to help ensure PBL's effectiveness and longevity. As the diagram above shows, the student learning goals in the center are always kept in focus, and the project should have seven Essential Project Design Elements.

- **Challenging Problem or Question.** The project is framed by a meaningful problem to solve or a question to answer, at the appropriate level of challenge.

- **Sustained Inquiry.** Students engage in a rigorous, extended process of asking questions, finding resources, and applying information.
- **Authenticity.** The project features real-world context, tasks and tools, quality standards, or impact—or speaks to students’ personal concerns, interests, and issues in their lives.
- **Student Voice & Choice.** Students make some decisions about the project, including how they work and what they create.
- **Reflection.** Students and teachers reflect on learning, the effectiveness of their inquiry and project activities, the quality of student work, obstacles, and how to overcome them.
- **Critique & Revision.** Students give, receive, and use feedback to improve their process and products.
- **Public Product.** Students make their project work public by explaining, displaying and/or presenting it to people beyond the classroom.

Not all projects have to have every one of the Essential Elements emphasized—as long as they’re present to some extent. The Gold Standard is meant to be aspirational, not a barrier, especially if teachers are new to PBL. (Learn more about the Gold Standard PBL model at [bie.org/resources](http://bie.org/resources).)

## Teaching Activity

## A “Gold Standard PBL” Project

### *March through Nashville*

*This project was designed and taught by Kimberley Trotter, 6th grade social studies/ELA teacher, McKissack Middle School, Nashville, Tennessee.*

#### Summary

In this five-week project, students learn about the civil rights movement by focusing on how it played out locally in the city of Nashville. They read *March: Book One* by John Lewis as an anchor text, and do research on local history using other historical literature and primary sources. Working in teams, students use ThingLink software to create annotated, interactive visual “museum exhibits” to guide people through the historic civil rights nonviolent protest held in Nashville in the early 1960s. As a culminating event, students present their work to a panel including representatives of the chamber of commerce, the Nashville Tourist Agency, the Tennessee State Museum, and state government.

In addition to content standards for U.S. History, the project addressed standards for reading (e.g., text analysis; compare and contrast different forms or genres), writing (e.g., conduct short research projects; write informative/explanatory texts), and speaking and listening (e.g., engage in collaborative discussions; present claims and findings; include multimedia components and visual displays; adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks).

#### Process

To launch the project, students visited the Civil Rights Room at the Nashville Public Library. There they looked through artifacts, including text, photos, and video, that captured the drama of what happened when thousands of African American

citizens in Nashville sparked a nonviolent challenge to racial segregation in the city. The students’ curiosity was piqued, and they wrote down their reactions to what they saw and read at the library. After hearing about the project and its driving question, “How can we, as historians, design a virtual civil rights museum app that will preserve the Nashville influence on the civil rights movement?” students generated a list of “Need to Know” questions using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) process. This was the start of the inquiry process they conducted for the next few weeks.

The class read *March* along with other texts, kept a literature learning log, and discussed what they were learning and thinking about in Socratic seminars. Working in teams of three, students completed a graphic organizer comparing and contrasting the texts, which they displayed in a silent gallery walk where peers offered feedback on their ideas. Additionally, students interviewed guest speakers and revisited the library to do more historical research.

When they were ready to share what they had learned, student teams used ThingLink software to create annotated, interactive visual museum exhibits using a rubric to guide them. Before the culminating event, they practiced their presentations and received feedback from a panel, again guided by a rubric. To conclude the project, students completed their learning logs and reflected on what they had learned and on the project as a whole, which everyone involved judged a success.



## PBL in Social Studies

We see many varieties of PBL in social studies classrooms. Projects can be found in all grade levels and courses, from primary students learning about communities to middle school history, to 12th grade government and economics. Some projects are single-subject, and some are multi-disciplinary, taught by a team of teachers of art, English, science, career/tech, or math. PBL is also cropping up in Advanced Placement courses. Projects can be done individually, or in teams (which we recommend, if they are managed well and grades are not based mainly on group products). It's important to note that PBL can work for *all* students; it should not be reserved for those who have higher skill levels or who are fluent English speakers.

Since one of the Essential Project Design Elements is authenticity, I want to give history teachers permission to use simulations occasionally, instead of demanding that all projects be fully “real-world”—which would be a tall order for, say, a unit on Ancient Egypt. It's easier to find authenticity for a project about recent history, where students can interview people who lived through it or can find evidence of its lasting impact on their community. However, a project on more distant history is often more engaging if it can be connected to themes or issues that students would find relevant to today (doing this might mean abandoning a chronological approach to history).

Here are some of the general, “classic” types of PBL projects found in social studies. In all of these, keep in mind the Essential Element “Public Product”—students should share their work with people beyond their classmates and teacher:

- A debate, speech, social media campaign, or multimedia presentation on a current event or controversial issue—the more local and personally relevant to students, the better.

- A museum exhibit about a historical time, place, person, event, or development.
- A proposal for a monument that explains a historical event or development.
- A simulation of a situation when people in the past, or in the present day, have to solve a problem, make a decision, or advise a leader.
- Signage, a podcast, a guided tour, a field guide, or an annotated online map about local history.
- An action or service learning project to benefit the community.

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Please notice that I did not list “PowerPoint presentation.” This is often a default idea for a project, but it can be fraught with problems, as you well know if you've sat through tedious presentations with boatloads of information copied from a website, but no critical thinking or creativity. A slide presentation might be appropriate if it has an authentic purpose, such as persuading the city council to adopt a new policy, but otherwise ... use with caution.

As you read about social studies projects in this issue of *Social Education*, you'll see many exciting examples of projects like these, and other novel ideas. The creativity PBL unleashes in students and teachers is wonderful to behold. Keep the Gold Standard in mind

as you find inspiration, whether you're designing your own project or adapting one from another source. If you're new to PBL, we advise starting small, and trust that as you gain experience you'll make projects a regular feature of your teaching practice. 🌟

*You can find further information and resources such as videos, a project library, project planning tools, research, and more at [bie.org](http://bie.org).*

### Notes

1. J.E. Brophy, *Motivating students to learn* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
2. N. Capon and D. Kuhn, “What's so Good about Problem-Based Learning?” in *Cognition and Instruction* 22, no. 1 (2004): 61–79.
3. N. Finkelstein et al., “Effects of Problem-Based Economics on High School Economics Instruction” (Washington, D.C.: NCEE 2010–4002, U.S. Department of Education). And also, R. Geier et al., “Standardized Test Outcomes for Students Engaged in Inquiry-Based Science Curricula in the Context of Urban Reform” in *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 45, no. 8 (2008): 922–939.
4. John Larmer, John Mergendoller, and Suzie Boss, *Setting the Standard for Project-Based Learning* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2015): 24–53.

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