

PBL Blog

How to Get Higher-Quality Student Work in PBL

By John Larmer

“I thought the project was going well... but by the end, I felt that the work my students produced was not as good as I imagined it would be. I was a little embarrassed and almost wanted to dial back the audience’s expectations on the night of the presentations!”

This is a common concern of teachers who are new to Project Based Learning. Things can appear to be going smoothly; students have been engaged by the project, they’ve been learning content and skills, they’ve been busy and meeting deadlines... but their thinking is not as in-depth and their final products not as polished as they should be. If this is your experience, ask yourself some questions:

1. Did I use rubrics and exemplars to help students understand the quality of work expected?

Simply telling students that you want them to do high-quality work is not enough, nor is giving them a checklist that tracks completion, but not quality. Most PBL teachers know they need rubrics in order to assess the complex products and performance tasks typically seen in projects. But rubrics should also be used throughout a project as a tool for guiding students as they work. Introduce rubrics near the beginning, when students hear about (or help decide) what the major products of the project will be. Actually, it’s more than an introduction; it’s “get to know it well,” so don’t just point out a rubric you’ve created and say, “Here’s how you’ll be assessed.” Have students either (a) practice using the rubric several times or (b) co-create a rubric and then practice using it.

To have students practice using a rubric, find some exemplars of the kind of work required in the project. You could find real-world examples made by professional adults, or use student-created examples from past years. For example, if students need to write a scientific report after an investigation, show them one — on a different topic, to prevent direct copying. If they need to build a museum-style display, take them to a museum or visit its website. If the product is a presentation, a designed artifact, or a work of art, show videos, photos, or physical examples.

Have students use the rubric to assess the quality of the exemplars and debate their decisions until the class arrives at a consensus and is “calibrated” on the criteria.

Another tip for clarifying high expectations: Depending on what kind of product the project requires, bring professional experts in to class, or visit them in person or online, to hear about the criteria used to judge the quality of a similar product in *their* work. For example, have an engineer describe how she defends the mathematical models used in a proposal for a new construction project, or have a sculptor explain how he puts together a proposal for a piece of public art.

2. Did my project include effective formative assessment?

Your project calendar should have several checkpoints on it when formative assessment can happen. Teach students how to use critique protocols (such as the Tuning Protocol, gallery walk, charrette) that emphasize what Ron Berger calls “kind, specific, and helpful” feedback. Make sure students use rubrics or other established criteria as the basis for giving critique.

Of course, the teacher also must provide feedback and critique, so make sure yours is based on clear quality criteria and arrives in timely fashion. That latter point can be tricky; if 35 rough drafts arrive on your desk all at once it's going to take some time to review them. Peer critique can help lighten the load, and so can the use of other adults acting as project mentors and experts. Also consider setting staggered checkpoint dates for different student teams.

3. Did students have enough time to revise and polish their work?

Especially the first time you conduct a project, it's easy to overlook how long it might take students to create high-quality products, whether it's writing, live presentations, or multimedia and digital products. After they get all that helpful feedback, they're going to need time to reflect and act on it and revise their work.

Maybe it's hard to imagine adding another few days to your project calendar. The need to "cover" content frequently causes a tension in PBL. So you may have to weigh the trade-offs and make a choice: do I want the highest-quality work, or is there some other level I can accept? (A word of reassurance: the more you use PBL in your teaching, the better you'll become at finding the sweet spot between time and quality.)

4. Did the project feel authentic enough to motivate students — did they care?

A project should increase students' motivation to learn and produce quality work because:

- Students care about the issue, problem, or topic of investigation because they see its relevance to their own lives. The answer to the project's driving question matters to them.
- Students care about the fact that they are producing work for a public audience. It's not a just another instance of turning something in to the teacher, or another casual presentation in front of the class. Students will come to know the quality of a product matters if they want to make an impact in the real world. They are going to want to impress people and not be embarrassed when they share the results of the project, whether it's a live presentation of a solution to a community problem, the launch of a website they've created, or a demonstration of a product in front of its intended users.
- Students feel a sense of authenticity when they collaborate with adult professionals, experts, parents, or community members during a project. "We're working as these adults do," students will think, "and they don't do shoddy work." And those outside adults — often more powerfully than words from a teacher — can encourage students to do better work.

5. Does my classroom — and my school — cultivate a culture of quality?

In addition to the above, there's a less tangible but very important aspect to getting students to do high-quality work: culture. Through the stated and unstated beliefs promoted by adults, and the structures and rituals of a classroom — or more effectively, throughout a school — students get the message: we do good work here. "Build the Culture" is one of the Project Based Teaching Practices in our model for Gold Standard PBL.

Talk as a school staff about how to promote commonly-held classroom norms that encourage students to take risks, be persistent, value feedback, and expect much of themselves and their peers. As Ron Berger says in his seminal book, *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students* (Heinemann 2003), "when students expect excellence out of each other and hold each other to high standards, you'd be amazed what can happen in a school."