Cross-Disciplinary Project Based Learning: A Case Study

The presentation will cover the details of an interdisciplinary PBL involving cultural literacy (English & history), theology, and science (biology). The project was successfully enacted at Holy Family Academy and focused on social justice issues. In addition to learning hard skills (MLA formatting of sources, research skills, etc.), soft skills (team dynamics, presentation skills, etc.) were explored. All student teams produced an electronic product. These products were incorporated into an app the students could download onto their phones.

The project was aligned to the PBL Gold Standards: Essential Project Design Elements outlined by the Buck Institute for Education (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015).

1. Challenging Problem or Question

The international agents’ (students) mission is to create a digital product on a social justice issue that will be used for future missions for ...Shhhh! The agency that cannot be named!

Students ask: How might we create an app that incorporates religion, cultural literacy, and science to raise awareness of social justice issues?

2. Authenticity

- *Real-world content*- real-world professionals research and raise awareness for today’s social justice issues
- *Real-world process/tools*- digital products approximate professional standards
- *Personal authenticity*- aligned to students’ interest, concerns, and values

3. Student Voice and Choice

Students are advocates of their social justice cause. Teachers guide them in making their products and teach methods to voice their thoughts. We built opportunities for student feedback and input into the planning schedule. Students critiqued assessment tools for clarity and provided suggestions for improvement.
4. Sustained Inquiry

Interdisciplinary inquiry process prompts student to ask different kinds of questions in each class, all focused on the same topic:

- **Theology** - How do the seven virtues of Catholic social justice apply to this issue?
- **Biology** - How does knowledge of populations and ecosystems relate to this issue?
- **Cultural Literacy** - How has history influenced today’s issues? How should I go about reading an informational texts? How can I analyze and interpret a historical source?

Students ask new and more specific questions as they progress through the unit.

5. Critique and Revision

Rubrics and checklists are used for self evaluations, peer evaluations, and teacher evaluations. Planning documents and drafts are part of the process, not optional tools. We strive to document our discoveries and process. A joint calendar was created with details of all lesson targets and project benchmarks to help the organizing teachers and the students see how the process comes together.

5. Reflection

Students complete bi-weekly evaluations on their team’s collaboration skills. We frame this as a “mindset award” where you can give “props” to team members for positive contributions. Issues or concerns can be deduced from the evaluations and classroom observations can be used as discussion points for fishbowl circle, where students respond to problems and propose solutions. In our plans for the unit, students would complete an essay describing and evaluating their process from start to finish. This was retooled into a Google form in response to schedule changes at the end of the term.

6. Publicly Presented Product

We stage a student showcase to publicly present the work of the unit. Originally, we planned on submitting products to the Thomas Merton Center: Pittsburgh’s Peace and Social Justice Center. Unfortunately, this did not happen due to scheduling conflicts. We are hoping to arrange a public venue this year.