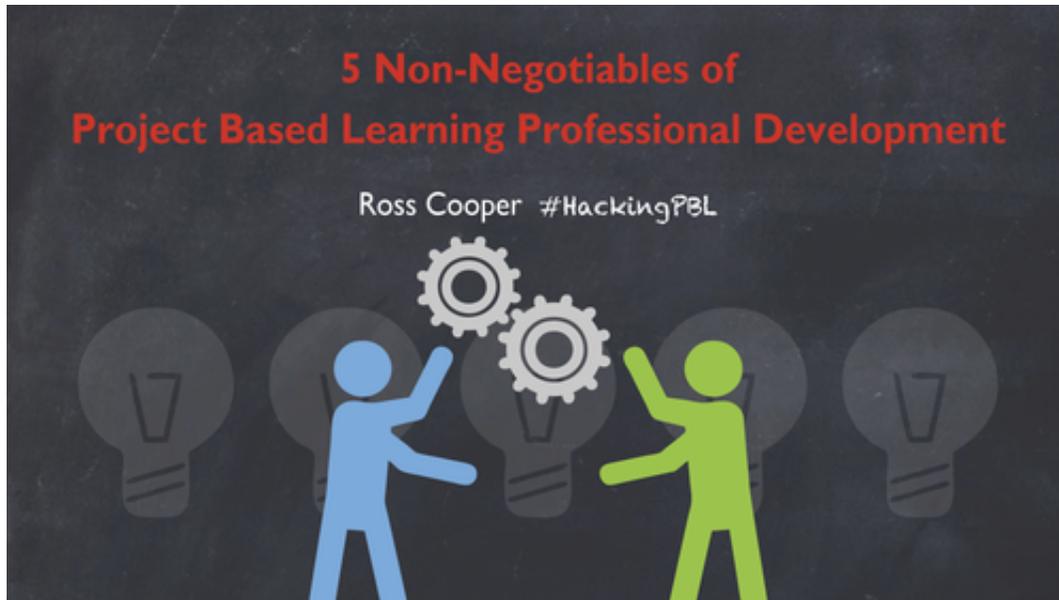


5 Non-Negotiables of Project-Based Learning Professional Development

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on February 1, 2017 6:55 AM



Today's guest blog post is written by [Ross Cooper](#), Supervisor of Instructional Practice K-12 in the Salisbury Township School District.

Running any form of professional development can be a daunting task, whether it is at the district level, at a conference, etc. At the beginning of the planning process, facilitators often don't have much more than a blank slate and a job such as, "You have [insert amount of time] to teach your audience about [insert topic]." I have been leading project based learning (PBL) professional development for several years, and I have found that preparing with certain non-negotiables in mind (1) always provides me with a comfortable starting point, and (2) assists in making my sessions that much more effective.

Here are my five non-negotiables of project based learning professional development.

1. Offer several entry points.

As participants plan their projects, it could be tempting to tell them something like, "Start with what you want students to know, understand, and be able to do, and then work backwards from there!" Or, if you are taking a wider lens, you might encourage participants to first work on establishing a culture of inquiry and creativity in their classrooms. However, these aren't the only two possible entry points.

As [Erin Murphy](#) and I declare in our book, [Hacking Project Based Learning](#), "The more we have familiarized ourselves with PBL, the more we have come to realize it is a series of best practices joined together." Some of these practices include: rethinking learning spaces, explicitly teaching collaboration skills, facilitating student self-assessment, providing effective feedback, and student reflection and publishing. *And*, every one of these practices (and more) can be leveraged as a PBL entry point, with each participant deciding where to begin based on his or her comfort level.

2. Ask participants to start small.

As classroom teachers, Erin and I participated in our school district's PBL initiative in 2010. In the first year of the initiative, district administration asked the pilot team, as a soft start, to implement and then share just one PBL unit at some point during the upcoming school year.

If your participants are new to PBL, you can challenge them to do the same. Then, have them reflect on their experiences with their students and expand and improve upon their use of PBL in years to come. At the same time, make sure everyone has a common understanding of what a PBL unit involves, as I have seen many initiatives stumble when it is assumed everyone is on the same page with academic vocabulary (e.g., personalized vs. differentiated vs. individualized learning). In addition, participants with PBL experience can push themselves further by implementing more than one unit and/or by promoting PBL with more open-ended inquiry and exploration.

3. Keep the Futures Thinking to a minimum.

According to the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\)](#), "Futures Thinking is a method for informed reflection on the major changes that will occur in the next 10, 20 or more years in all areas of social life, including education." On a daily basis I bump into countless "Futures" articles and resources as I scroll through my social media feeds, and I have heard several speakers call for schools to change with such lines as, "[Insert percentage] of our students' jobs don't even exist yet!" I get it.

And, while I believe this kind of talk does have a place in PBL professional development (start with *the why* to tap into emotions), waxing poetic about the future shouldn't supplant the hard work of following up with *the how*, which will vary based on context. From what I have experienced, *vague directives in the absence of explicit instruction typically generate anxiety*, and the majority of teachers simply want practical strategies to move their students forward.

4. Teachers can work *inside* classroom walls.

Speaking of meeting teachers where they are, participants can be intimidated when PBL is portrayed as learning that *must* take place outside the classroom for it to be authentic: connecting with experts, making a difference in the community, going on a field trip, etc. While projects like these are undoubtedly beneficial, don't hesitate to remind teachers that breaking down classroom walls isn't always necessary.

In [Hacking Project Based Learning](#), Erin and I explain,

"Authentic can be described in terms of process and product. An authentic process involves consistent iteration and personal feedback related to the learning process...authentic products have a personal connection to students and/or an impact outside of the classroom walls."

For example, the [pinball machines](#) made by my fourth graders never made their way into an arcade, but (1) the engineering process included constant

iteration and reflection, and (2) what students learned involved real world skills related to electricity & magnetism and force & motion.

5. Intentionally move away from PowerPoints.

The last thing you'll want is for your project based learning initiative to result in nothing but more opportunities for students to simply churn out PowerPoint presentations, or something comparable because they were given the freedom to "dump" their research/information somewhere else. You can try to circumvent this potential issue by encouraging participants to design PBL experiences in which students must solve a problem (Problem Track), or in which students can demonstrate their understanding of designated content however they choose (Open-Ended Track).

If these approaches seem a bit overwhelming for teachers (and possibly, students), start with units in which all students produce the same product (Set-Product Track), but the journey to the product can look different depending on students' creative decisions and trials and errors. In all instances, if students are assessed and/or graded based on learning targets, and not their ability to follow directions, they will naturally carve out pathways and products that move away from traditional slides.

These five points represent what I believe are the five non-negotiables when planning any form of project based learning professional development. So the next time you have the task of rolling out PBL, call upon these ideas to get you started!

What are your non-negotiables?

Ross is the co-author of [Hacking Project Based Learning](#) with Erin Murphy. Connect with [Ross on Twitter](#).