

# 3 Keys to Making Project-Based Learning Work During Distance Learning

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## Project-Based Learning

This challenging time provides an opportunity for students to work on real-world problems they see every day.

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Amid a pandemic, educators are trying to figure out how to make sure that kids are socially in tune, emotionally intact, and cognitively engaged. Moreover, we're all attempting to figure out how to do this across a plethora of mediums, including computer screens, video cameras streaming into classrooms, and engaging students face-to-face albeit across shields, masks, and plexiglass.

Still, there is an opportunity here to give students a chance to discuss the challenges of their own environment, the barrage of news they face daily, and the core content they need for long-term success. One of the best options to meet these demands is for students to engage in rigorous problem- or project-based learning (PBL)—an approach that ensures students develop high rigor and experience high relevance by solving problems or completing tasks in a remote or face-to-face environment.

## 3 Shifts to Consider When Designing Your Next Project

**1. Focus on challenge:** Students need challenging learning experiences and expectations every day. The best way to ensure challenge is to make sure that projects are underpinned with rigor. I define rigor as the equal intensity and integration of defining, relating, and applying core facts and skills in and across multiple situations. PBL is ideal for meeting these requirements because of the way projects are sequenced. Projects begin with an application-based task or question, and then students define and relate core facts and skills to answer the initial question. In this way, students learn how to define and describe,

relate, and apply knowledge through a project-based question or task.

### **Checklist for ensuring rigor in PBL:**

- Provide students with a high level of reading, writing, and talking tasks. When students are reading, writing, and talking, they're having to think about core content knowledge. Try to avoid cutting, pasting, and scrolling tasks, which are not usually cognitively demanding.
- Provide students with a challenging problem or question that involves multiple contexts or situations. When students are shown that the problem or question may occur in multiple situations, they have a higher probability of applying their knowledge.

### **Checklist for remote learning:**

- Have students preview a challenging question or task before class, and then have them post what they already know and specific questions they have about the question or task.
- Start each lesson with a brief review of the challenging question or task, and ask students to post on the chat how the upcoming lesson will support them in answering the question.

**2. Focus on clarity:** One of the most important factors to help students learn core content, give and receive accurate feedback, and own their own learning is to have a high level of clarity of core content expectations as compared with the context of the problem or task. When students are clear on their own prior knowledge relative to what is being taught, there's a higher probability that they will focus on their learning, listen to the teacher and peers, and retain new knowledge. Therefore, student clarity of learning is a high leverage strategy for teachers to focus on. Ensuring clarity is extremely hard in the classroom, but there are a few strategies that can be helpful in moving the needle for kids.

For more information on this point, check out John Hattie's *Visible Learning*, Graham Nuthall's *The Hidden Lives of Learners*, and Derek Alexander Muller's doctoral dissertation, "[Designing Effective Multimedia for Physics Education](#)."

### **Checklist for clarity:**

- Students use work samples of different quality to build evaluation tools. Provide students with successful examples of meeting your expectations for learning core content, and then ask them to build a rubric that indicates what those samples possess that makes them ideal.

- Students use protocols to discuss ways to give feedback using work samples and evaluation tools. Students need to be specifically taught how to give each other feedback. One suggestion is to use protocols such as critical friends and tuning protocols as a structured way to give and receive feedback. It's also critically important that students use work samples and rubrics when offering feedback, so that those receiving feedback can see concrete examples of expectations and can evaluate current gaps in performance.

### **Checklist for remote learning:**

- Post work samples on your LMS, and have students work in pairs to rank the work samples, write down their rationale for the work samples, and build a rubric.
- Film a breakout room conducting a critical friend or tuning protocol, and ask all students to watch the film and then discuss as a class the purpose for protocols and the strategies the students used to give and receive feedback.

**3. Develop a learning culture:** Developing a student's capacity to appraise their current performance relative to core expectations and devise and implement strategies to improve is ranked as one of the most impactful strategies for improving student learning. When students own their own learning, they significantly improve. During PBL, teachers can integrate specific strategies that build a culture of student ownership over time.

### **Checklist for clarity:**

- Students follow daily routines to ensure that they know the goals of learning, their current performance, and next steps, and share their results in small groups. Daily reflective exercises are critical for students to focus on their learning versus completing tasks.
- Change perspectives, scenarios or contexts, and tasks on students, and then discuss those changes with the class. Students need to evaluate different perspectives of a problem and adjust to changes to real-world challenges they are working to address. These can be delivered by sending a letter stating the changes; engaging in protocols such as four corners; changing the rubric; or giving new reading, writing, and talking tasks.

### **Checklist for remote learning:**

Start students in breakout rooms each day to answer three questions: Where am I going in my learning? Where am I now in my learning? And what's next in my learning?

Send students updates on their problems or projects via email or group chat, and then set up times for group meetings to discuss changes and steps they will take to handle such changes.