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An Appeal to Teachers: Consider a Pre-Planned Vacation

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I have a friend whose parents were not the traveling types. Not that they didn't love the idea of traveling to new lands and sipping wine on exotic beaches... It's just that many years had come and gone without the opportunity to take a big, exciting trip abroad.

Last spring, they finally decided this was going to be their year: they were off to explore the romance of Italy. Knowing her parents had never done anything like this, and being a seasoned traveler herself, my friend recommended they might try a pre-planned vacation — a packaged trip that would take care of the nitty-gritty: designing an itinerary, booking hotels, making restaurant recommendations, setting schedules, etc.

But my friend's mother was convinced she could do it herself, and she threw herself into months collecting train schedules, combing through customer reviews, and printing out small maps.

But on the ground her plans sadly became unraveled. Her time tables didn't account for obscure Italian holidays. Once-famous gelaterias had closed shop or turned over to new management. Ferries that looked quaint and charming online turned out in person to be just plain dilapidated.

All in all, the vacation has gone down in family history as part romantic getaway / part war story and her parents seem unlikely to plan a new adventure abroad any time in the foreseeable future.



The problem:

For teachers new to Project Based Learning, planning and teaching your first PBL unit can be a lot like this Italian vacation. We think to ourselves: we know our students, we are experienced in the constituent parts of a PBL unit, we've dealt with group projects before... But once we actually set sail, it can be a whole new story.

As educators, the process of expanding our teaching practice to include PBL is not a simple one. Like a new country (with its own unique language, culture, and history), a PBL unit introduces novel and unexpected challenges and complications, even in its most familiar tasks.

What we recommend:

In my mind, teachers new to PBL could learn a lot from my friend's advice to her parents: start with a pre-planned vacation. In PBL terms, that means rather than starting from scratch to design and build your own unit, try starting with a project that's already been designed and tested.

Like a pre-planned vacation, a well-designed PBL project can distill an experience down to its most important parts while removing as many barriers to success as possible.

And indeed, one of the wonderful things about PBL projects is that they are often incredibly adaptable. I was recently talking to a teacher in Lanai, Hawai'i who built a really successful PBL unit for her third graders, where they researched their small town and created a walking tour. That unit could easily be adapted for ESL students in a high school in Los Angeles, or a social studies class in a Gettysburg middle school.

There are no shortage of fantastic PBL units that have been fully developed and classroom-tested by amazing teachers all over the country. One of our goals at BIE is to collect shining examples of these existing units, and convince teachers to start there.

The big challenge we face:

Getting a teacher to take a pre-planned vacation can be a really hard sell. As teachers and educators, we often take deep pride in our ability to craft lesson plans, activities, and units that are tailor-made for our students. There is a dominant narrative in many schools that since you're a teacher, you should "design your own."

But it is important to remember that our ultimate goal is to impact our students. Starting them off in PBL might mean giving our own egos the day off (and since pre-planned units mean less curriculum design for us, we get some rest or time off ourselves!).

Four reasons why a pre-planned vacation is a great start to PBL:

1. If you start with the extreme, it's that much harder to succeed as a teacher.

Like my friend's parents, when you try to do everything on your own on your first try, you open yourself up to a lot of difficulty. And for many teachers, one failed attempt at a new kind of teaching is enough reason to never try again. At BIE, we've seen that once a teacher gets to the point where they are in a working and successful PBL project, once they feel it and they experience it, they are sold. So our goal is focusing on getting teachers there as quickly as possible. For many, the quickest path to early success is these pre-planned projects.

2. For students, the extreme is also hard.

A PBL model is also a big change for students as well. By the time it's 4th or 5th grade, kids have learned how to "do school" pretty well. Now, we are changing the rules. Knowing that students will be experiencing some growing pains is another reason why first-time PBL teachers should consider the pre-planned unit. They can dedicate more talent and energy to execution and guiding students, rather than building and designing a new kind of unit.

3. Pre-planned units are a way ALL teachers can try to bring a minimum "dose" of PBL to their students.

While it may not be realistic (or perhaps, even desirable) for all schools to be using PBL all the time, we believe strongly that all students would benefit from a minimum dose of PBL education. All we ask is at least two projects a year! In service of getting PBL units working, and working smoothly in as many diverse classrooms as possible, pre-planned units offer the most support for the most teachers.

1. A pre-planned unit is just the beginning of a journey into PBL.

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It's not the end, just the beginning — your next year, or your next unit, is a totally different story. Teachers can use what they learned during their "packaged tour" to plan their own journey for their next trip. The **doability** of the pre-planned unit opens up whole new worlds of PBL opportunities for future classes — projects that can get more complicated with more and more student agency as the teacher becomes more and more versed in PBL instruction.

And where we go from there:

A pre-planned unit, like a pre-planned vacation, is a perfect first step. Like with anything new, the first (and hardest) step toward PBL is adoption — but a pre-planned unit makes it a whole lot easier. From there, teachers can adapt, and eventually, design and innovate. Some may move faster than others, but the journey looks the same.



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