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Supporting the 21st Century Classroom: Fostering Relevance and Resilience with Project-Based Learning Curricula

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Presentation Title: Supporting the 21st Century Classroom: Fostering Relevance and Resilience with Project-Based Learning Curricula

Keywords (5+): project-based learning, high-impact practices, integrated curriculum, transferrable skills, multidisciplinary, collaborative teaching, collaborative learning

Abstract (25-50 words):

Participants will learn about building and supporting project-based learning, a scalable, flexible approach to classes and programs that cultivates 21st century competencies in students, including collaboration and resilience. They will re-imagine a course or a program at their own institution from within a PBL context.

Description (300-500 words):

Higher Education is increasingly under fire for “not preparing students” for the “real world.” Students don’t want to pay ever-higher prices for classes that “aren’t relevant” and degrees that may or may not get them jobs. Employers and industries are setting up certification programs to provide a faster, cheaper track to jobs they need filled.ⁱ

We argue that this disaffection is, in part, due to the increasingly specialized set of disciplines in the academy, often siloed and competing for scarce resources. At our own institution, this led to less inclination to innovate and cross boundaries. Many faculty are also influenced by this mindset—even attracted by it—because they are specialists and see the classroom as their domain, a closed sphere of absolute influence. As a corollary, in the academy there is also less attention given to teaching as a practice.

We assert that project-based learning (PBL) is a possible answer to reinvigorating higher education. Recentring the student around authentic engagement in a project with genuine stakes allows us to move away from the perception of the core curriculum as a checklist to tolerate. Successful completion of an authentic project requires disciplinary depth, critical and creative thinking, productive collaboration, and effective communication—all competencies essential to the 21st century. As faculty and administrators, we can facilitate and bridge the gaps between disciplines to support students as they solve complex problems, co-create the learning process with us, making meaning together.ⁱⁱ

PBL is learning *through* doing, and it can be done within one course, across multiple courses, or across a whole program. Learning in an authentic context, ideally with feedback from external partners, while working in teams builds resilience through iteration, builds interpersonal and professional communication, requires research and deep disciplinary understanding and application.ⁱⁱⁱ Because of its scalability according to instructor, department, and even college preference and its ability to cultivate in students work-ready (and life-ready) skills, it has immense value in any disciplinary context.

It is also a lot of work—designing and supporting classrooms that set up authentic projects and allow space for exploration, failure, and iteration. At our institution, this required the establishment of a new multidisciplinary academic unit. We’d like to share our experience as administrators supporting learning in PBL contexts and what that has meant for us: managing pay scales, scheduling, hiring, introducing collaboration into faculty expectations and annual evaluations, and developing curriculum and approaching assessment in new ways.

This interactive workshop will allow participants to re-imagine a course or a program at their own institution from within a PBL context. Interactive activities will include 1) guided development of a project idea from their own discipline/context, 2) discussion of how different disciplines could connect

within a single project, and 3) consideration of how to support faculty in successfully implementing projects. The presenters will then provide personal examples of PBL in single courses, small groups of connected courses, and across entire programs, thus demonstrating the flexibility and scalability of PBL.

ⁱ Lauria, P. (2021). 5 Reasons People Are Changing Careers More Than Ever Before. U.S. Chamber of Commerce. <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/5-reasons-people-are-changing-careers-more-than-ever-before>

ⁱⁱ King, C.J. (2010). The Multidisciplinary Imperative in Higher Education. Center for Studies in Higher Education. https://cshe.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2010_the_multidisciplinary_imperative_in_higher_education.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Grossman, P., Herrmann, Z., Kavanagh, S.S., & Dean, C.G.P. (2021). Core practices for project-based learning: a guide for teachers and leaders. Harvard Education Press.