ABLEMARLE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Intellectual Challenge and Accomplishment

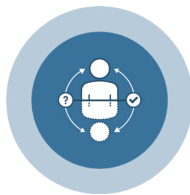**Authenticity**

Public Product

Collaboration

Project Management

Reflection

The Framework for High Quality Project Based Learning (HQPBL) describes PBL in terms of the student experience. It describes six criteria, each of which must be at least minimally present in a project in order for it to be judged "high quality." The six criteria were chosen as a necessary starting point for providing students access to HQPBL because they are an essential baseline, but they are not all-encompassing.

Projects that are the most memorable, and that have the greatest impact on student learning and development, will be those with the highest quality implementation of each criterion. The case study that follows highlights the six criteria and is intended to provide readers with a real-world example of HQPBL.

For more information and resources, visit the HQPBL **Albemarle County Public Schools** page:

Students work together to create their product prototype

The walls are covered with student work products, and classrooms are buzzing with voices and sounds of collaboration. Students are working on integrated projects tied to their passions, interests, and to real-world causes. This is a common scene found in most classrooms in Albemarle County Public Schools, located at the base of Shenandoah National Park in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"I started Project Based Learning when I began teaching over ten years ago and have been fortunate enough to be refining and reflecting my practice ever since then," Jamie Dion, a teacher at Woodbrook Elementary, shared.

"As a district and at our school, we noticed that students just weren't retaining the content the way we were teaching. We were doing units but in a very choppy way, where kids were learning one topic for three weeks and then something completely separate the next."

PBL in the Early Grades

Jamie facilitates a 1st and 2nd grade multi-age classroom that uses Project Based Learning (PBL) as the main instructional approach. She admits when starting out that projects were more of students creating replicas than they were high quality PBL (HQPBL) experiences and true student learning by doing.

Her team, along with many others in the district, decided to make a shift. As a result of their efforts supported by district backing and professional learning, students are now thriving in HQPBL environments.

"We analyzed the standards and organized them in a meaningful way, so that kids were actually going through experiences rather than just doing projects in isolation from one another. As a result, what ended up happening was that we created these nine-week units embedding a multitude of standards, but in an authentic and meaningful way."

In every one of the nine-week units, students have a maker portion where they build and construct before their actual end product. Here, they get to prototype ideas. There is always an authentic audience and purpose, often doing work that directly benefits or is connected to their own community.

"We plan really intentionally so content is connected to the project and so that students are collaborating; they're using the language and applying the vocabulary so that really, the making is proof that they've understood what they're supposed to know," Jamie said.

Jamie described a recent PBL student experience:

"In the YouVille unit, a project where students design a town and unpack who they are in their own community, their question was 'who are you?' That's guided them through who they are as an individual within their family community, within their classroom community, within their greater community, within their Virginia community. We will have an authentic audience coming in from Maker Market and they'll be actually going through being the producer and selling their goods or services to people, and the money that they raise will be going toward our field trips for the school year, so they have that purpose for learning."

Materials students put together for planning their YouVille project
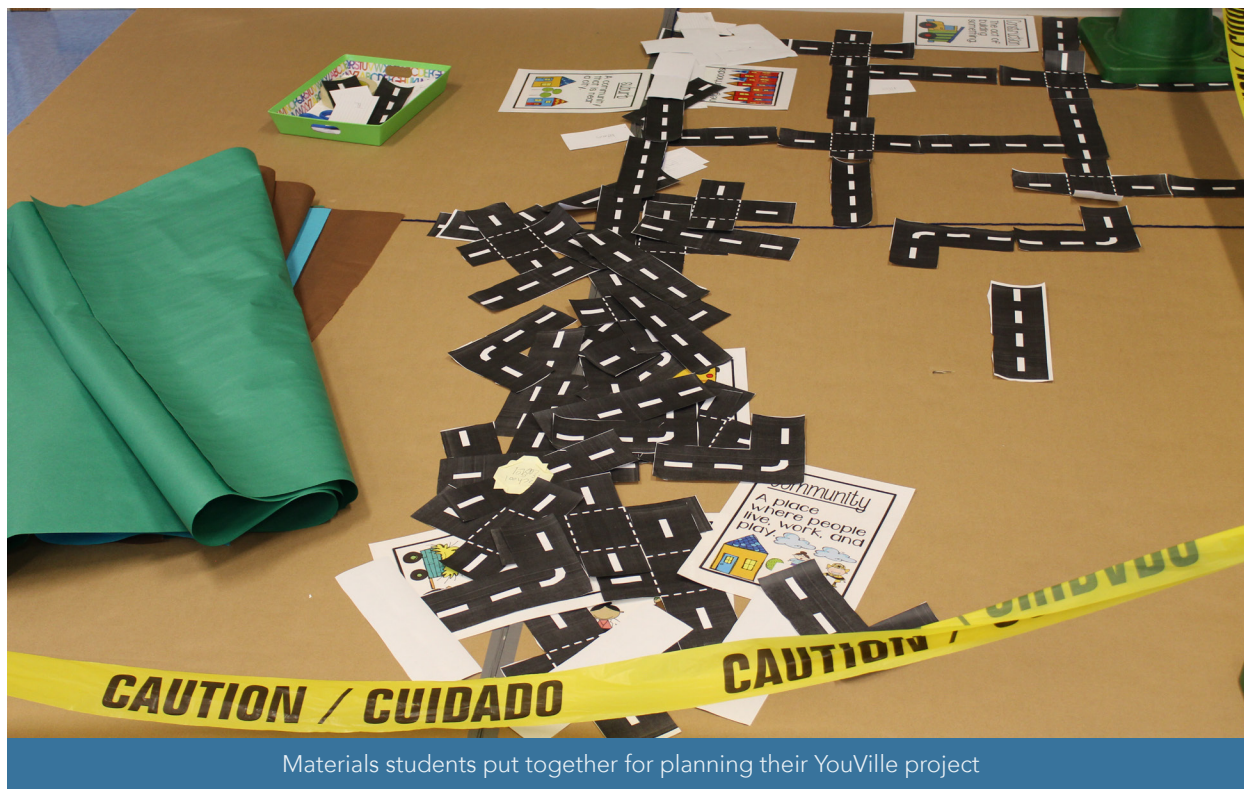
Jamie finds that students at this age still need many scaffolds and management tools to help guide them through the project. "We definitely work through the gradual release model," she explained. "We always start with direct instruction and then give kids more and more control of their learning as the units progress. We also use a lot of templates so that they have checklists and playlists, so that they know where they are in the process."

The initiation and planning of the projects at the beginning of the year may have more teacher guidance than activities toward the end of the year. This also goes for executing the project and monitoring students' work throughout.
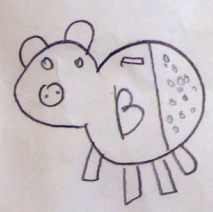
Students use tools and templates to plan their projects

Managing Long-Term Projects

"We also use different graphs and charts in the classroom," says Jamie, "so that as educators, we're able to see, 'Oh, this student needs a little extra support today,' or ask 'how can I further the understanding of a different student in their growth throughout the project?'"

Feedback has figured prominently in their Project Based Learning environment, although it didn't necessarily start out that way.

"In our first year completing these nine week project based experiences, we found that we weren't providing feedback throughout the processes of their learning. So, we've put in check points so that we are able to confirm understanding and check for understanding throughout. It's not always just the teacher checking—we've been really trying to do a lot of peer collaboration and peer checks for understanding."

PBL student experiences in ACPS always include collaboration, public products, real accomplishment and challenge, reflection and authenticity. Perhaps even more compelling, Jamie describes how they have also seen impressive results since implementing high quality PBL on state accountability measures.

"As a Title 1 school, we see that there is an achievement gap. Being able to give kids high quality PBL experiences is huge; having them be able to take what they learn and be able to apply it in maybe 10 or 20 different ways throughout a nine-week period helps to really make that learning and understanding concrete. Looking at my results from last year when we first started having PBL at the forefront of learning, it's made all the difference. Kids are achieving to a greater extent than they were with our traditional content design."

PROJECT EXAMPLE

In the PBL experience "Should Charlottesville get a zoo?", students study all about life cycles, habitats, and whether specific animals should live in Charlottesville and if they would thrive in Virginia. Students choose an animal and then their Maker project involves a podcast where they write a public service announcement to the Mayor of Charlottesville either making the case for a zoo and the kinds of animals that should be included in it, or offering up an evidence-based argument for why we shouldn't have a zoo.

"PBL is definitely something that we do every single day in our lives. So, giving kids the skills and giving them the exposure to doing project-based learning, as well as problem-based and passion-based learning is really setting them up to be self-directed learners in the future. With the way the world is turning, that's the kind of jobs that will be prevalent in 10 years from now."

— Jamee Dion

HQPBL STUDENT EXPERIENCES THROUGHOUT K-12

These HQPBL experiences and outcomes extend through middle and high school for students in ACPS. Ms. Mclaughlin, educator for twenty-five years, described how PBL has brought not only her students a renewed sense of purpose but also invigorated her own teaching and engagement.

"I have been working with different co-teachers over my time as an educator, and we've always tried to have a PBL-type focus before we even called it PBL. We realized how meaningful those deeper learning experiences are and wanted to make them even better. The biggest difference for me in my teaching career has been that I started out having students just do projects just for the sake of projects." Ms. Mclaughlin realized it became important to focus on projects that have deeper meaning, or as she shares, "Have some real community impact, real authenticity, either within the school or even in the larger Charlottesville community."
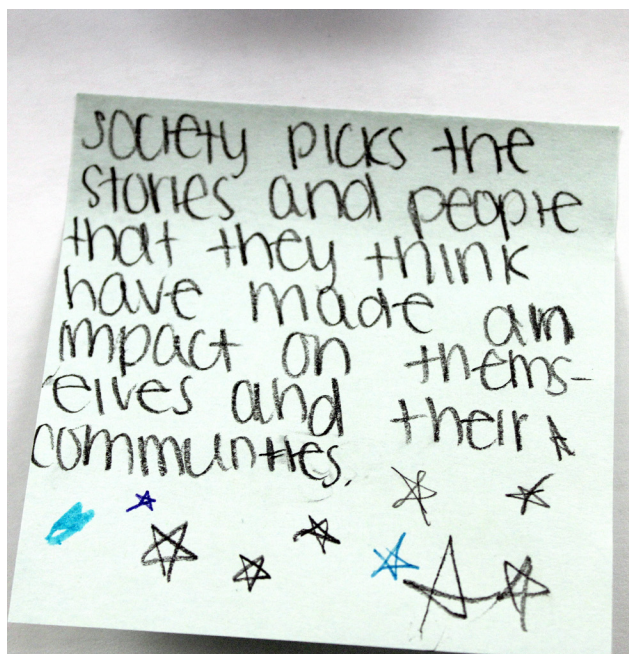
LET THEM SHINE

The National Writing Project is working with Albemarle County Public Schools on a yearlong grant-focused initiative where students were asked to consider how we memorialize stories, and what monuments are built and why. Students had the opportunity to choose a story—a local story that hasn't been told—that currently doesn't have a monument or any exhibit. This has given them the freedom and creativity to tell that story in really public way. The goal was for student projects to end up as a part of the fabric of Charlottesville.

How does society determine which stories are frequently told?
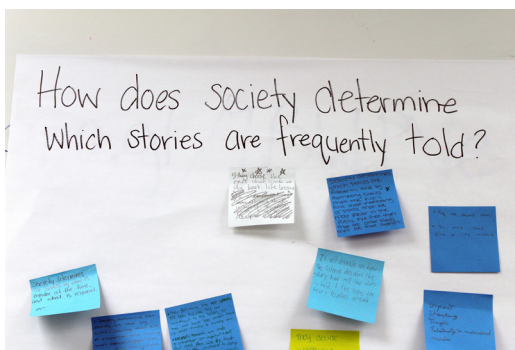
Let 'Em Shine Project

- Student-directed passion project focused on a local untold story
- YOU will get to design and build a monument or memorial to add to the story of Charlottesville and Albemarle County
  - These designs can take a variety of forms using technology or traditional building materials– it's up to you!
- YOU will get to CHOOSE your groups! (2-4 people)
  - Choose wisely! You will be with this group ALL YEAR for work related to this project
- YOU will conduct extensive research on the power of monuments/memorials, the power of the story, and how to engage the public effectively
- YOU will complete this project in PHASES throughout the year and present at a community showcase in May with students from Albemarle, Monticello, and Murray

society picks the stories and people that they think have made an impact on themselves and their communities.

Ms. Mclaughlin co-teaches with Ms. Laux, English teacher, and they develop projects that include content spanning disciplines. Students in their class have the opportunity to practice skills in research, writing, and presenting across content areas. It feels natural because students also are able to select topics, products, and tell their own stories along the way.

"PBL is good for any level student, because it does bump-up that challenge of thinking and trying to organize their work and ideas. Any kid, no matter their level, can really get involved in some deep critical thinking…a lot of our students used to feel disengaged in school, and this [PBL] is exactly the type of work that they get really passionate about, and helps develop and push their skills even further," Laux shared. Laux added that the intellectual challenge and responsibility to manage their own projects has been difficult at times for students, but that they always rise to the occasion. Students share with Laux that they feel a great sense of accomplishment since they are owning and directing much of their learning.

How can ACPS educators ensure that each student is growing and developing in requisite areas? Laux and Mclaughlin have systems to give feedback and help engage students in managing their own projects.

"We circulate and check-in with students, and they work together to push each other in projects," she said.

Students in their class have roles that they define when they initiate the projects. "I think we also like to encourage students to push each other a little bit, and maximize on each other's strengths in their different roles."
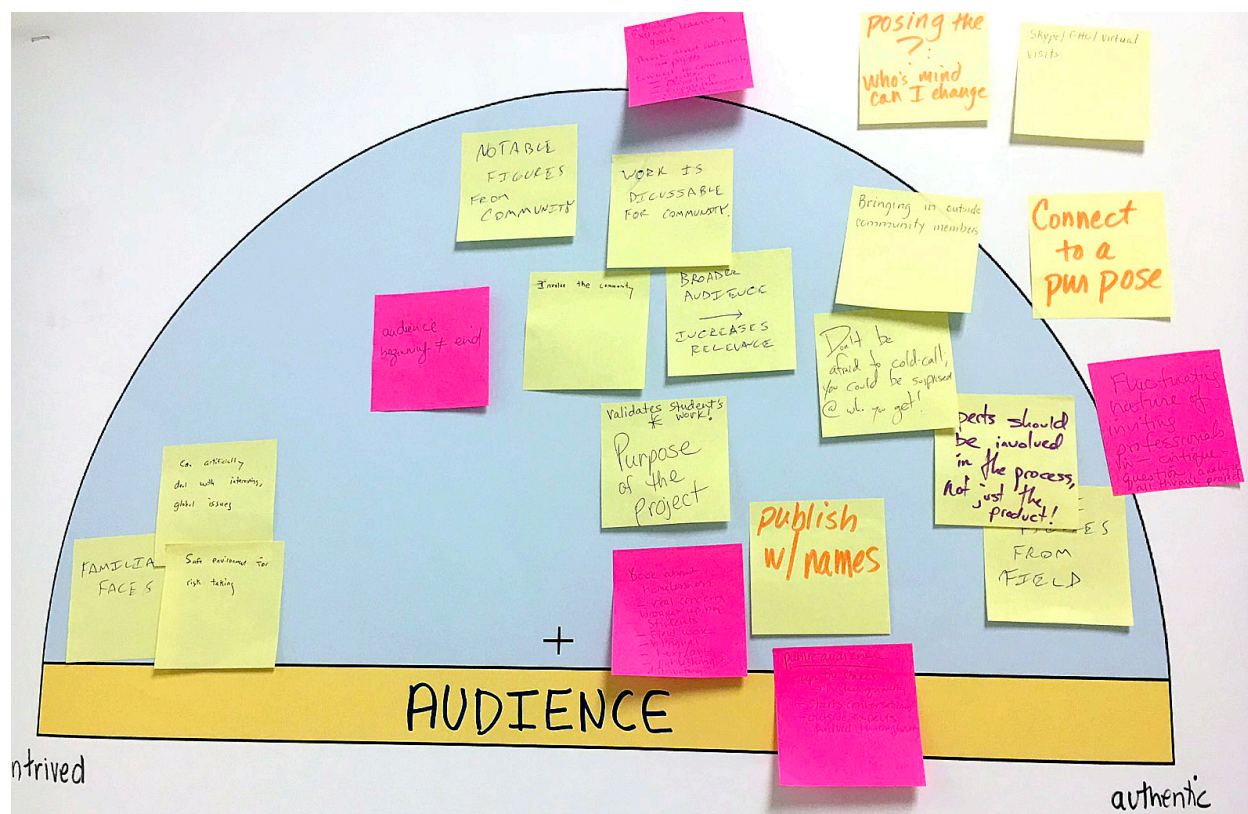
Teachers meet throughout the year to evaluate their PBL practices and discuss if they are providing students with high quality experiences.

Teachers in ACPS work together to push themselves, too, in their PBL practices—deepening the level of quality. Two areas that have been a focus for the district are project management and collaboration.

The result is that educators are trying new methods and using new tools to engage students in tracking their work and paying attention to how students work collaboratively.

"We provide the structure and a little bit of the scaffolding and the due dates, and then we also try to have check-ins. We try to have meetings with students either if they are working in a group or on their own. We use Socratic Seminars and different workshop styles. In the Let Them Shine Project, which is focused on unpacking what we memorialize in society and why, students obtain feedback from each other and also from outside experts and community members. We assess how students worked in their group and they grade themselves on how they did, as well as how their group members participated."

The educators in ACPS also rely on university professors and community members to provide feedback and assist with workshops, ensuring that students receive expert feedback.

> *"Not only real authenticity, but in high quality PBL we want to see real challenge. We do a lot of presenting and try hard to push them, sometimes outside their comfort zone. One of the things we hear in the end of the year survey is that they [students] often feel that they've become better writers, better researchers and better presenters. And that feels like a big win by the end."*
>
> — Ms. Mclaughlin, ACPS teacher

Reflection in ACPS PBL is key. As part of the Let 'Em Shine project, Laux and Mclaughlin realized that looking back on one's efforts is incredibly important work, and that students ought to consider the impact far beyond the project they do in their classroom this year. "We want students to have long-term effects. When they go see a monument or memorial or to a museum, they should continue to ask questions like, "What story is being told? What story isn't being told?" We want them to look around with a more critical eye, so that it's not only that they're going to create something at the end, but rather as they go forward in life, there's always that idea about uncovering the story."

"The most important lesson that we've learned over the past couple of years, I think, is to trust the students. Time and time again, we'll be really surprised where we're not sure how something is going to transpire, and the students—they get so into it, and they produce a product that is way beyond our wildest expectations."

Tapping into Students' Interests Yields Engagement, Agency, and Higher Test Scores

Engaging students with Project Based Learning works—regardless of the students' current desire, background, or challenges.

Laux shared: "Last year, for example, we had a group of students that created a podcast about war. They got so into it, we were absolutely floored. They made a podcast that we are likely still going to use as an exemplar for years, all because it was something they were interested in and became passionate about. These are students that might have come to us pre-labeled as 'disengaged,' and because we gave them an opportunity and trusted them, they delivered."

Western Albemarle High School students in front of the tiny house that they designed and built as part of a HQPBL experience

Changes to classroom processes may typically seem to come at an inopportune time; naturally, shifting routines can and does impact both students and teachers. Often, however, such changes usher in an environment ripe for learning—without rote instruction.

"We were a bit hesitant last year," says Jamee, "thinking about statewide end-of-course tests, and had some doubts about reshaping our whole classroom. Yet our students' test scores went up, and it wasn't the result of informational 'drill and kill' exercises or anything like that."

The outcomes will only continue to pour in for students and families at these schools, as the high quality Project Based Learning continues to grow and develop. The energy and enthusiasm for learning in ACPS is contagious, and it is fueled by this approach and commitment to providing all students HQPBL experiences.