Project-based Learning:

Learning about PBL from Successful Freshman Writing Projects

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Abstract

My paper follows up on a more theoretical counterpart (Nunn et al., 2016) on project based-learning, by highlighting written data from two projects conducted by students. My experience over the last 25 years indicates that research done by freshman students can be both insightful and sophisticated: it can be used to better incorporate their voice into our curriculum, but also into our own thinking about scholarship and research. In my present context, the traditional individual research essay was central to the common course syllabus. It was modified in my own courses to incorporate active learning (Acar, 2019) involving real engagement and investigation by the student through an individual student project. I discuss and emphasize key extracts from just two project reports to illustrate important academic writing principles of project based learning in my context. I argue that the method-in- use I illustrate is inevitably unique and context bound. More importantly, I argue that articulating, sharing and adapting underlying practice-inspired principles should make any method-in-use (at least partially) translatable to any other unique educational context.

According to BIE (2015), "Project Based Learning (PBL) is *a teaching method* in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects" (slide 1,n.p., my italics). In this paper, I will first consider the difference between an 'avowed method' and the actual method being used in a particular context, what I have called 'method in use" in previous papers (Nunn 1996 (my PhD thesis) and Nunn, 2011 in IRAL.) In a nutshell, in my 1996 thesis, I was able to demonstrate through the analysis of recordings and observations of actual classes in the Qatari school system that the avowed so-called communicative method was never actually being practiced in local classrooms. This was important as it made discussions about the success or otherwise of the innovation of the communicative method rather void. The British-written

textbooks were intended to reflect state of the art communicative practices, but what actually happened in the classroom – the method-in-use- was more like a teacher-fronted rote memorization approach. Follow up research in other contexts (Nunn, 2011) came to similar findings. The notion of method-in-use therefore encourages us to talk about real practice when comparing teaching methods or approaches rather than starting with theoretical discussion about what is claimed as practice without any documented evidence.

Rather than clouding my discussion with excessive preemptive theory about other people's practice, I will forefront actual data from one context in which I claim to be using a holistic project-based approach in my own classes - it is a deliberate choice to include only five references in this paper. *My* method-in-use can never be *your* method-in-use. We may all believe we practice some form of PBL, but we will conceptualize it differently and practice it differently. I will nonetheless assume in subsequent discussion, that what happens in one context, while not directly transferable to another, is 'translatable" in terms of learning theory and practice to almost any other context across time and space (Nunn et al, 2016). By 'translatable' we mean that there is always an essential act of adaptation to context, which will involve locally relevant, but internationally relatable interpretations of similar learning theories and practices. If this is not the case, exchanging thinking across cultural and contextual borders about our local practices in international forums such as ESBB would be pointless. Acar (2019 and 2020), for example, in a Turkish context, draws on a Council of Europe perspective of language teaching (e.g., Puren, 2008b), emphasizing the notion of training social actors "who can live and work together in a multilingual and multicultural society" (p.137). He considers an action-oriented approach (social action-based learning) to be a key factor in this context.

Unlikely as it may seem, my own first experience of PBL was as a primary school student investigating the local textile industry, at what I have often wrongly assumed was a very traditional minded school in West Yorkshire in the 1950s. My most recent is in Sharjah in 2020 as a university professor specializing in teaching and investigating the development of academic literacy.

In terms of original data, I will draw only on successful self-directed students' original writing from my own recent contexts, in which we attempted to practice a so-called project-based approach to learning academic literacy. I will present this without extensive theoretical discussion (See Nunn, Brandt and Deveci, 2016 for a more theoretical paper), preferring a data-first approach here. However, I do acknowledge that this is in itself a theoretical stance in which I assume that a data-first approach reflecting method-in-use has merit. Here I would like to move away from common journal-paper practice of elaborating a theory in a literature review, establishing a gap in the literature and then attempting to bridge this gap with my own research results and subsequent discussion.

In one context in which I worked over an 11-year period, a full-blown team project-based course was the avowed approach. In my current context, the traditional individual research essay is still the basis of the course syllabus. I have modified it in my own courses to incorporate active learning

involving real engagement and investigation by the student through an individual semester-long student project. Descriptions of, and extracts from, project reports will be used to forefront the students' own voices. While I will attempt to illustrate the way PBL can be used to enhance both formal writing and critical argumentation skills in writing courses, my data also indicates that research done by freshman students can be surprisingly sophisticated. It can be used to better incorporate the students' highly relevant voice into our curriculum, but also into our own thinking about scholarship and research into teaching approaches.

Students' Projects

The context

Here I will draw on two projects from what was a relatively standard, American–curriculum, academic essay course in an American-curriculum university in the Middle East. This will illustrate how institutional constraints can still be respected, given that the course respected the prescribed syllabus, but was transformed into a self-directed project-based approach at one and the same time. In the prescribed syllabus, the students do three main essays, (1) a critical analysis of a text, (2) a persuasive argument essay and (3) a research essay (often not including the collection of actual data, but drawing on readings from academic literature). In this pilot study, I asked students to select one research topic to investigate for the whole semester. The essays would all be related to that self-directed topic choice and would terminate with a social-action based persuasive essay. They could either work on their research individually or in small more interactive groups, but the essays had to be written individually (an institutional requirement).

In this section of my paper, I will as far as possible, let the students' voices do the talking by providing reasonably long extracts under a range of headings. The headings were generated from a previous paper on PBL in relation to developing critical argumentation (Nunn, Brandt and Deveci (2016) in which we identified ten underlying principles for teachers, which are slightly revised in the following list. I consider principle 1 (self-direction) to be a superordinate principle in that project-based learning is an approach that allows students the space to develop their own project. However, the other nine principles of critical argumentation underline the fact that this is no abdication by the teacher, who uses the PBL as a holistic framework in which teacher-directed sessions are also potentially valid, but do not dominate. Hence, the preference for a pool of materials that may be used as needed rather than a linear textbook model.

1. Instruction needs to provide opportunities for self-regulation through which learners develop their argumentation skills (Seen as the SUPERORDINATE principle on which all others depend)

2. Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus on relevance by referring to known information from literature in relation to their own projects [lit. review, discussion section]

3. Instruction needs to ensure that learners have opportunities to explain their ideas and project choices [report introduction & methodology section and discussion]

4. Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus on their choice of words to express appropriate levels of confidence in relation to evidence [Epistemic modality in lit. review and report discussion section]

5. Instruction needs to be directed at developing the ability to analyse issues and problems (such as by breaking a problem down into manageable components) [planning full reports, presentations, analysing a research topic]

Instruction needs to develop the ability to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of arguments, research approaches, conclusions (in literature for example) [Lit. review, discussion]

7. Instruction needs to develop the ability to interpret findings from their reading or own investigations [Lit. review, discussion]

8. Instruction needs to develop the ability to synthesize output such as in group lit. reviews or discussion sections of reports [discussion]

9. Successful instructed learning provides interaction opportunities promoting dialogue to enable learners to develop their reasoning ability [teamwork for projects, interaction with materials]

10. Instruction needs to provide opportunities for learners to critically examine their own written output in terms of coherent argumentation [peer-reading proofreading, second drafting]

(Adapted from Nunn, Deveci and Brandt, 2016)

A similar list adapted for (self-directed) students reads:

1. *Look for opportunities for self-regulation to develop your own argumentation skills.*
2. *Seek out opportunities for interaction with peers (and teachers) to develop your reasoning ability through dialogue.*
3. *Focus on relevance by referring to known information from literature in relation to your own projects.*
4. *Explain your ideas and research choices.*
5. *Focus on your choice of words to express appropriate levels of confidence in relation to your evidence.*
6. *Develop the ability to analyse issues and problems (such as by breaking a task down into manageable components).*
7. *Develop the ability to synthesize output such as in group literature reviews or discussion sections of reports.*
8. *Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of arguments, research approaches, conclusions (in literature for example).*

> 9. *Interpret findings from your reading or your own investigations by selecting and explaining what is most significant.*
> 10. *Critically examine and proofread your own written output not just for language but also for coherent and balanced argumentation.*

In the first week of the course, I emphasized self-direction by helping students select a viable topic of their own choice. The criteria for the choice were based on (1) relevance to themselves and their fellow students (2) the feasibility of collecting real data on it on or from their own campus, and the availability of background readings. The key factor emphasized (3) was their own strong interest in the topic and their desire to find out more about it. They then searched for an academic text on their chosen topic and we taught them to do a critical analysis of the text (their first graded essay). We asked them to select a second text on the topic to help critique the first.

In the fifth week of the 15-week semester, students wrote a reflective analysis of their experience of writing their critique essay. I then reversed the syllabus order so that the research essay (the focus of this paper) took center stage at the heart of the semester for the next 5-6 weeks. They generated sub-topics and research questions, collected more readings, to make a minimum of 5 academic texts. They also chose 3 suitable data collection methods for their topics, of which only one would actually be pursued in what we were terming a pilot research study in this course. They then went through a standard research process of writing a literature review, using this to help them generate 3 subtopics leading to the creation of a data collection approach. They wrote a brief methodology section for their developing essay. Some chose to create a tailor made experiment, others designed and conducted a survey and a few conducted interviews. Once the data was collected and analysed on each of their subtopics, they drafted a results section, a discussion section and a conclusion. They learnt to write an APA reference list and typically added appendices to avoid overloading the essay itself with data. During this process, they were supported by lessons on different aspects of the writing process, including language and academic style. (See appendix for a possible 'translatable' checklist for the research essay.)

To guide the learning in the course, I found it useful to map the principles taught alongside the project work on to specific activities that form part of the holistic project as illustrated in table 1 below:

Table 1 Mapping Principles and Abilities to Activities within a Holistic Project

Sub-activity	Principle-based Skills	Language
Review of literature Writing a literature Review	Selecting relevant information, concepts and citations Annotating/note taking of relevant text Summarizing relevant information Interpreting an author's point of view Evaluating evidence Organizing a literature review thematically Synthesizing relevant information for each theme Developing and supporting one's own Self-regulated Argumentation	Epistemic modality Choice of critical reporting language

.

Below I present just two case studies. Both dealt with a topic considered by the students to be of relevance to all freshman students, the problems of stress and the problem of mental health. Both topics raise particular issues of student voice and their relationship to the topics.

Case Study 1 - *The effect of stress on academic performance among freshmen*
Engagement in the project (self-direction)

In her research essay, after providing a little background, the student immediately establishes personal relevance: "Being a freshman myself, I would love to know more about the effects of stress on my performance." She provides three subtopics to provide a suitable focus: "*We will focus on its effects on memory, creativity, and productivity among freshmen students. The main three questions that we will ask are:*

  1. How does stress affect freshmen's memory?
  2. How does stress affect freshmen's productivity?
  3. How does stress affect freshmen's creativity?"

Ability to select relevant and appropriate data collection procedures

After a literature review covering all three subtopics, the student was able to articulate a coherent plan of data collection, that was relevant to their study (principle 3) conducted interactively with a classmate interested in the same topic:

> *In order to investigate the influence of stress on Academic performance among freshmen, we settled on three research methods: a survey, an interview with a specialist, and a case study. The survey would give us an idea on how stress affects the academic performance among freshmen in AUS, while the interview with the specialist would give us the scientific and the psychological interpretation behind the phenomena. Finally, the case study would give us in depth information about the effects of stress on freshmen, while taking into consideration the other factors that might play a role in our results. Due to the time and resource limitation in this pilot study, our primary data was restricted to a survey in this report. The survey was answered by 28 freshmen from different majors at AUS, including both genders equally. The 10 questions in the survey covered the three different aspects in which stress affects academic performance: creativity, memory, and productivity.*

Articulating Synthesized Results Clearly

 The student went on to present results across three subtopics, as in the example below of productivity, which was one of the three subtopics selected by the student.
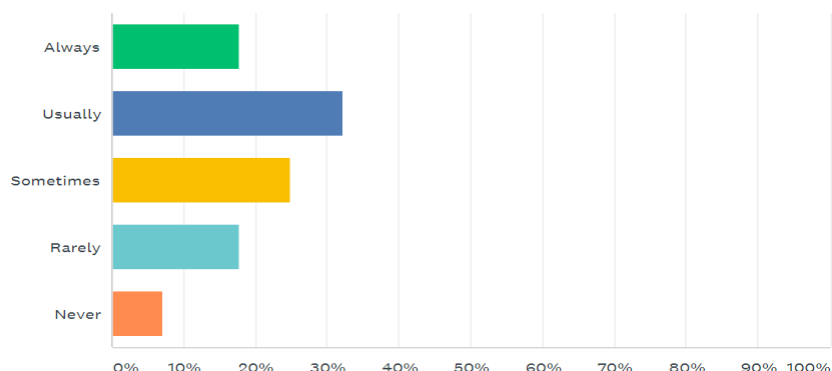
> ***Results:***
>
> *In this section we will present our significant findings in the survey which was completed by 28 students in the American university of Sharjah (see full survey in appendix A).*
>
> *Productivity:*
>
> *The two common answers to our question "Do you get more work done under stress?" were "usually" and "sometimes". The percentage of students that reported that they "usually" got more work done under stress was 32% while the percentage of students that said "sometimes" was 25%.*

Do you get more work done under stress

Answered: 28   Skipped: 0

Secondly, we asked the students if stress made them avoid their responsibilities. The results were 46% "sometimes" and 25% "rarely".

The ability to interpret the findings coherently (principle 9)

Perhaps the most important skill learnt by doing one's own research is the ability to discuss relatively limited pilot study results in relation to the literature reviewed earlier in the paper. In this extract below, the student was able to synthesize information (principle 7 above) from her own results and the literature, and managed to cope with contradictions within the literature to draw her own inferences from the evidence available. At the same time, she was able to use epistemic modality (principle 5) to avoid making exaggerated claims, as illustrated in the sentence: "Stress might increase productivity among freshmen when it is at a moderate level and decrease productivity when its level is too high.", extracted from a longer citation (below) from the discussion section. Another feature of this paragraph is the ability to synthesize (principle 7) her own results with finding from the literature review.

Productivity:

When we asked the students if they got more work done under stress, the two common answers were "usually" and "sometimes" (32% answered "usually" and 25% answered "sometimes"). Secondly, when we asked the students if stress made them avoid their responsibilities, the two common answers were "sometimes" and "rarely". (46% answered "sometimes" and 25% answered "rarely"). According to Gino (2016), stress has a completely negative effect on productivity (n.p.). Stressed individuals squander time worrying instead of actually working. On the other hand, Halkos et al. (2010) found that there is an optimum level of stress at which individuals are most productive. Individuals would be unproductive if their stress is below or above that level (n.p.). Halkos et al.'s (2010) findings correspond with our survey results. When students said that "sometimes" stress made them avoid their responsibilities, they may be referring to times where their

stress level was higher than the optimum level. This leads us to the conclusion that the effect of stress may depend on the intensity of stress. Stress might increase productivity among freshmen when it is at a moderate level and decrease productivity when its level is too high.

The ability to use taught modules to draw reasonable conclusions from evidence

Within a holistic project framework in which the students are self-directed, it is still possible to use activities, which resemble exercises from a more formal approach. One such focused language session taught epistemic modality choices. The student practiced what had been learnt in the focused language activity (exercise) in her self-directed essay (principle 5 above). She reached a reasonable conclusion in what was a first attempt at research conducted as only part of one freshman course. The sentences "*Students seemed to give up when their stress levels were too high and to be careless when their stress levels were too low. Therefore, we can conclude that the academic performance of freshmen is at its optimum when stress levels are moderate.*" from the longer extract below illustrate this point.

> *Conclusion:*
>
> *Through linking our primary findings with the background reading, we were able to discover the effect of stress on academic performance among freshmen and how it influences their creativity, memory, and productivity. We found that stress has a similar influence on creativity, memory, and productivity. The effect of stress is primarily dependent on the intensity of the stress. Creativity, memory, and productivity were enhanced when stress was moderate. However, all three aspect of academic performance declined when stress was on the two extremes. Students seemed to give up when their stress levels were too high and to be careless when their stress levels were too low. Therefore, we can conclude that the academic performance of freshmen is at its optimum when stress levels are moderate.*
>
> *Although most of the background literature affirmed what we found in our survey, this study is merely a pilot study and is not sufficient to determine the absolute effect of stress on academic performance among freshmen. The number of students was small and the methodology was restricted to a survey. In addition to this, these findings could have been influenced by other factors that we didn't acknowledge. Therefore, further research that includes a larger survey population and a variety of research methods is needed to better determine the influence that stress has on freshmen's academic performance.*

Case Study 2 - How and why have our ideas and perceptions of mental illness changed over time?

The student in case study 2 adopts a related topic. I have selected this example as it is in some ways similar to case study 1. However, it also illustrates how a freshman student attempts to extrapolate from her own context and is able to discuss global dimensions. Here I will provide just

3 extracts to illustrate how her voice is clearly present in the selection of data collection instruments, the discussion of her results and (differently) in the conclusion of the report.

Self-Directed Method Choice

In this section, we can see how the student's language choices indicate self-direction: she uses a frequent first person voice (in every sentence) to explain her thinking about the choices she made.

> *The two different research methods that I had considered using were surveys and interviews. After going back and forth, at one point thinking it would be a good idea to do both, I looked back on my research question and realized that obtaining qualitative work would be more helpful in coming to a cohesive conclusion to my investigation, so I decided to stick with interviews, as they allowed the participants to further explain their theories and opinions on the topic. I presented 5 people (with varying cultural backgrounds) with 6 questions that I felt would best help me come to a conclusion regarding my thesis, and allowed them the flexibility to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings surrounding the topic, which they would not have been able to do had I presented them with a simple survey.*

> *Control Questions:*
>
>   1- *What are your opinions on mental health?*
>   2- *Do you believe that there is a stigma around mental health?*
>   3- *Do you believe that gender plays a role in the stigma?*
>   4- *Do you have any personal experiences with mental illness and/or the stigma that surrounds it?*
>   5- *Do you feel comfortable asking for help? If not, why?*
>   6- *Do you think that culture plays a role in mental health and the stigma that surrounds it?*

An extract from the discussion section – the value of self-direction

This extract is interesting in the way it illustrates the limitations of the research essay when it is based only on reading (as in the traditional research essay). She points out that 'she failed to recognize' an important issue in her initial reading-based thinking, indicating that it was only her own self-directed investigation that led to a deeper understanding.

> *I found the results of my interviews very interesting because although they support my initial hypothesis about imagined awareness, I found the results showed me more than that. While formulating my hypothesis, although I did take culture and surroundings into consideration, I failed to recognize that some people, although aware of mental health issues and the stigma that surrounds it, were not aware of some of the mental health issues that they carried within themselves. While some of the interviewees were aware that they were suffering from one type of mental health problem or another, the rest of them*

discussed how they deal with stress and complying with cultural norms, without realizing that they were unhealthy. The method of interviews proved very helpful in finding deeper and more contextual information on the topic. After I asked my questions to my participants, the format of an interview gave me the opportunity to stay with them and further discuss their opinions, allowing them to go more in depth about their understanding and their own theories that surround both mental health in general and the stigma surrounding it.

Extrapolating beyond the context

This research report was interesting in the way the student was able to extrapolate across gender and culture in an attempt to adopt a global outlook. The "I" of previous sections, becomes an inclusive 'we' in the conclusion.

In conclusion, we are able to see from the research that a lot of different factors add to or take away from the stigma that surrounds mental health. It seems to be general consensus that gender plays a large role in both mental health and the stigma that surrounds it, but the type of stigma that arises depends on if the subject is a male or female. Cultural backgrounds also seem to have an effect, because as discussed; in western cultures, it is definitely more acceptable to express your emotions and struggles because of the individualistic nature of western societies. It is still difficult for us to accept or refute different diagnoses when they are presented to us, because it is still difficult to be certain of whether or not the diagnosis came from a professional place, especially with the introduction of the internet and self-diagnosis. Mental health and the stigma around it has proved to be a complicated concept to grasp, because so many different things need to be factored in when trying to come to a conclusion about the topic, but if we all individually try harder to understand mental health, rather than stigmatize it, we would definitely be on our way to a better and more understanding world.

Concluding Discussion

Emphasizing Method-in-Use

I have emphasized that it is the method-in-use (Nunn, 1996 and 2011), the documented, recorded or observed method actually practiced that can be discussed more relevantly than a theoretical discussion or a discussion of a prescribed textbook. Having summarized the project-based approach taken in an academic writing course, I used substantial extracts from the project reports drafted by the students to illustrate the actual outcomes of the adopted approach in relation to a simple list of principles inspired by practice.

Self-direction, and eclecticism within a holistic framework

The extracts shown above indicated that students did communicate the self-directed nature of their study in their language choices. The writing had a voice. We could also conclude there is no need

to exclude other approaches such as so-called task-based learning activities from a holistic project-based approach. The holistic self-directed project provides the guiding framework: the overall project has divergent outcomes in that each student will produce a different outcome. But there can be also be sets of relevant, demonstrated, repeated tasks with holistic outcomes, which are themselves supported by focused exercises with focused convergent outcomes. These support the project incrementally as it progresses. Some of these may be pre-planned, such as tasks (in a writing course) which teach skills such as in-text referencing. All research reports will need this skill. Others will be taken from a pool of materials and only used when clearly needed at a particular stage of a particular project. Tasks and exercises may even be designed in situ for this purpose if there is nothing available in the materials pool.

For example, students may be tasked to access webpages which illustrate APA in-text referencing, to analyze examples given on these sites. The task is to make a list of 'rules' or 'guidelines' for in-text referencing based on the examples on the site. They then access a different site on the same topic and refine their lists. They can also do interactive tasks where they circulate, compare with other students and produce a group list. Individuals can then be asked to produce similar examples for integration into their reports, or to peer check the examples already in their reports against their own guidelines. Self-direction is the underlying principle and is practiced across approaches and methods. Tasks are not projects, but they can support projects and can be self-directed. Teacher directed exercises practicing the grammatical use of reporting verbs are not self-directed, but could also support what is ultimately a self-directed project.

In conclusion, I have proposed project-based learning, as a holistic learning framework, but not as an end in itself or as a 'new method' with which to replace 'dated or old methods'. All students in this class were able to produce an acceptable report. In an anonymous post class survey, the students made unsolicited comments indicating that researching their own topic was motivating and led them further than they had expected. It was only by conducting their own research that they could really take autonomous control of their own document in a sophisticated way.

As a framework, it does not need to exclude contributing interludes of convergent, teacher-centered activities in the form of exercises. I used it to encourage the practice of learning principles which encourage inquiry, such as (potentially creative) self-direction, the application of different notions of relevance and the ability to interpret reading in relation to evidence from data.

We should also note that these are freshman students. Their ability to take control of their learning should not be underestimated. I have argued that PBL can be instigated in different contexts and at different levels of learning. Each context generates its own method-in-use, but we can find ways of translating another teacher's principled experience to our own context. The principles may be similar, the practices will look very different once they have been translated to each new context of use.

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Appendix

Pilot Research Essay – a Possible Progress Report and Checklist for Students

	Progress (tick if complete, otherwise add a comment on progress in the 3rd column)	Comment
Reading	I have selected 5 academic texts I have annotated all 5 texts I have selected only what is relevant I have synthesized relevant information thematically (subtopic by subtopic	
Data collection	I have chosen my data collection method I have designed the data collection instrument with thematic headings for each subtopic I have collected the data I have analyzed the data	
Cover Page	I have designed the cover page using APA	
Introduction	I have written an introduction	

	It has been peer evaluated	
Literature Review	**I have written my literature**	
	It has thematic subheadings	
Methodology	**I have written the methodology section**	
	It discusses 3 data collection methods including the one chosen for the pilot study	
	It discusses the sample size and the population	
Results	**I have analyzed the results**	
	I have selected the most relevant for the report	
	I have decided if I need an appendix for the data not in the report	
	I have written the data report section with thematic headings	
Discussion	**I have written the discussion section**	
	I have thematic subheadings	
	I have answered the research questions	
	I have referred back to the literature to do this	

Conclusion	**I have written the conclusion** **I have emphasized the main findings** **I have mentioned limitations of the present pilot study** **I have indicated future research needed**	
Reference list	**I have an APA reference list** **Everything on the list has an in-text reference** **Nothing used in the text is missing from the list**	
Appendices	**I have added important bulk data in a named and numbered appendix** **I have referred to any appendix added in the main body of the text**	