The PBL Starter Pack

10 ready-to-use tools to help you plan, launch, and lead high-quality PBL with confidence.

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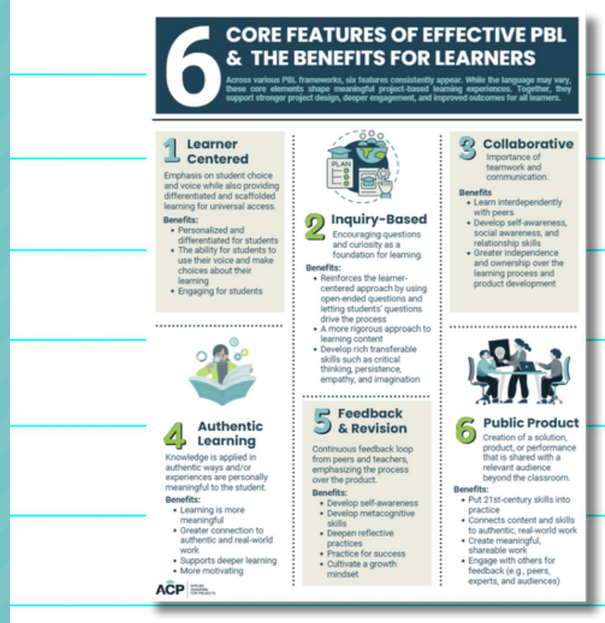
Foundational Understanding

These one-pagers establish a common foundation for effective Project-Based Learning. Utilize them to clarify what PBL is, how it manifests in practice, and how to prepare your classroom for successful implementation.

01

6 Core Features of Effective PBL

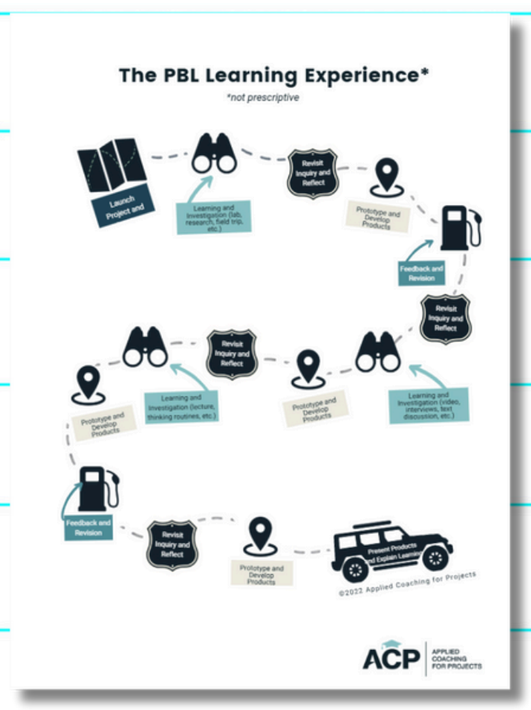
Outlines the core features of PBL and its benefits for learners, serving as a valuable starting point for aligning classroom practices with PBL principles.



Top Conditions That Support a PBL Culture

02

Explore the key conditions for thriving PBL, such as classroom environment, instruction, and materials. Reflect on your strengths and areas for improvement..



03

The PBL Learning Experience

This graphic illustrates what a project looks like from start to finish. It's a simple visual that helps you see how a PBL experience flows from launch to final product.

6 CORE FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE PBL & THE BENEFITS FOR LEARNERS

Across various PBL frameworks, six features consistently appear. While the language may vary, these core elements shape meaningful project-based learning experiences. Together, they support stronger project design, deeper engagement, and improved outcomes for all learners.

1 Learner Centered

Emphasis on student choice and voice while also providing differentiated and scaffolded learning for universal access.

Benefits:

- Personalized and differentiated for students
- The ability for students to use their voice and make choices about their learning
- Engaging for students

2 Inquiry-Based

Encouraging questions and curiosity as a foundation for learning.

Benefits:

- Reinforces the learner-centered approach by using open-ended questions and letting students' questions drive the process
- A more rigorous approach to learning content
- Develop rich transferable skills such as critical thinking, persistence, empathy, and imagination

3 Collaborative

Importance of teamwork and communication.

Benefits

- Learn interdependently with peers
- Develop self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills
- Greater independence and ownership over the learning process and product development

4 Authentic Learning

Knowledge is applied in authentic ways and/or experiences are personally meaningful to the student.

Benefits:

- Learning is more meaningful
- Greater connection to authentic and real-world work
- Supports deeper learning
- More motivating

5 Feedback & Revision

Continuous feedback loop from peers and teachers, emphasizing the process over the product.

Benefits:

- Develop self-awareness
- Develop metacognitive skills
- Deepen reflective practices
- Practice for success
- Cultivate a growth mindset

6 Public Product

Creation of a solution, product, or performance that is shared with a relevant audience beyond the classroom.

Benefits:

- Put 21st-century skills into practice
- Connects content and skills to authentic, real-world work
- Create meaningful, shareable work
- Engage with others for feedback (e.g., peers, experts, and audiences)

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TOP CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT A PBL CULTURE IN A CLASSROOM

Use this tool to reflect on your classroom or school's readiness for high-quality PBL. What's already in place? What needs attention?

1 LEARNING GOALS

Students recognize various learning goals, including academic, success skills, and competencies. They can transfer this learning to multiple contexts and see their understanding and application growth through the project process.

2 LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Students' intellectual risk-taking is supported and encouraged. They know mistakes are okay, but learning from them is part of the class culture through feedback and revision. The teacher models and reinforces language that builds student confidence, divergent thinking, and persistence. The classroom's physical space is used to help support the learning process and student collaboration.

3 ROLE OF TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Teachers and students share power within the classroom. A class has co-developed shared working agreements for how they work together and will treat one another, and it is regularly revisited. Students' active intellectual engagement is anticipated and encouraged by the teacher, and their voice is heard as much, if not more, than the teacher.

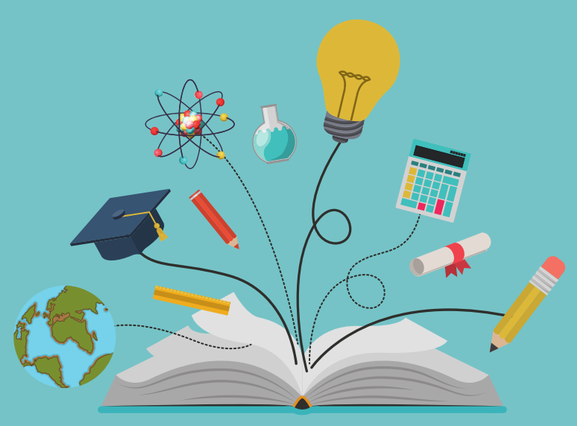
4 USE OF INSTRUCTION

Academic content and success skills are embedded into lessons actively and explicitly, often through collaboration. Units are taught in a way that is culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate for all learners. This includes addressing topics and skills that are authentic and relevant to students' lives and communities.

5 PROTOCOLS & ROUTINES

Students lead protocols and routines, share their perspectives, and reflect on their experiences regularly. Protocols are leveraged to bring equity of voice among learners and build a culture of sharing.

6 RESOURCES AND MATERIALS



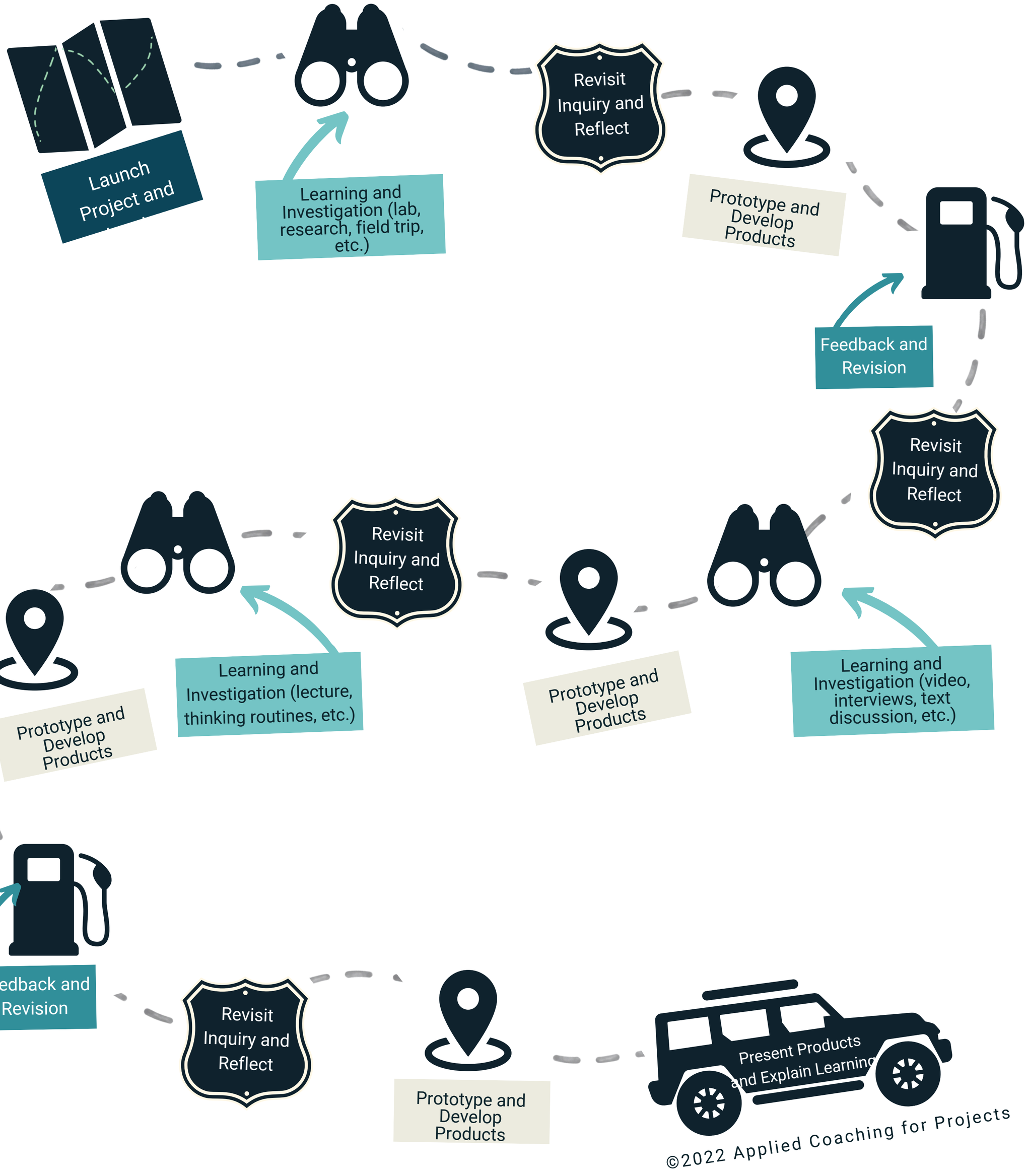
Texts and other support materials are chosen to advance content knowledge and student well-being. They honor student students' diverse identities and cultures to serve as a way for students to share and learn about one another's lives and backgrounds.

PRO TIP

Don't try to tackle all six conditions at once. Start with what's strong and celebrate what's working, then choose one area to strengthen. Small shifts make a big impact.

The PBL Learning Experience*

**not prescriptive*



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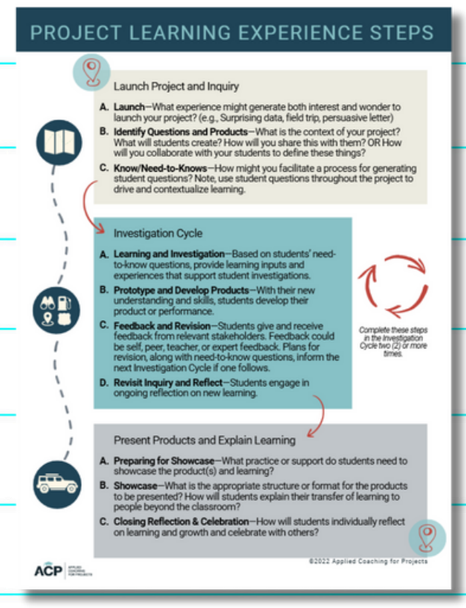
Planning Support

These one-pagers help in designing meaningful PBL experiences. They guide you through the general flow of a project, launching it well, and plan for meaningful assessment throughout, making planning smoother and more intentional.

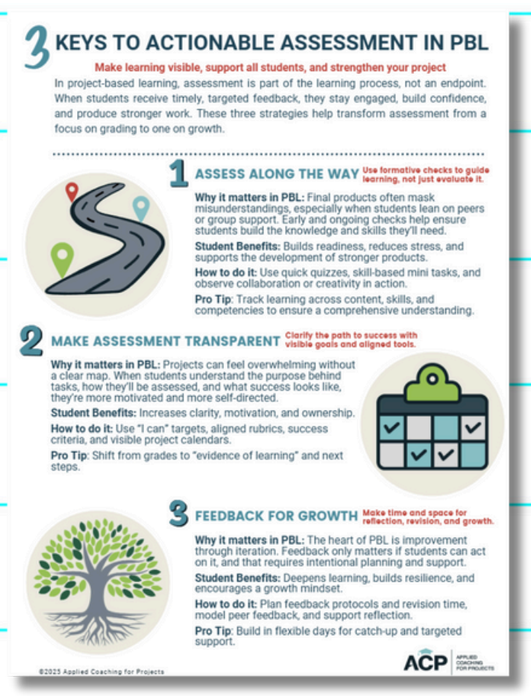
01 PBL Experience Steps

This tool outlines each phase of a project and what to focus on in each one. It's a practical guide to help you plan and pace your unit from start to finish.



02 3 Cs of Quality Entry Events

Use this tool to plan a strong project launch. It helps you create entry events that spark curiosity, build clarity, and connect students to the work.



03 3 Keys to Actionable Assessment

This one-pager breaks down how to design assessments that support learning throughout the project—not just at the end. Great for keeping things focused and clear.

PROJECT LEARNING EXPERIENCE STEPS

Launch Project and Inquiry

A. Launch—What experience might generate both interest and wonder to launch your project? (e.g., Surprising data, field trip, persuasive letter)

B. Identify Questions and Products—What is the context of your project? What will students create? How will you share this with them? OR How will you collaborate with your students to define these things?

C. Know/Need-to-Knows—How might you facilitate a process for generating student questions? Note, use student questions throughout the project to drive and contextualize learning.

Investigation Cycle

A. Learning and Investigation—Based on students' need-to-know questions, provide learning inputs and experiences that support student investigations.

B. Prototype and Develop Products—With their new understanding and skills, students develop their product or performance.

C. Feedback and Revision—Students give and receive feedback from relevant stakeholders. Feedback could be self, peer, teacher, or expert feedback. Plans for revision, along with need-to-know questions, inform the next Investigation Cycle if one follows.

D. Revisit Inquiry and Reflect—Students engage in ongoing reflection on new learning.

Complete these steps in the Investigation Cycle two (2) or more times.

Present Products and Explain Learning

A. Preparing for Showcase—What practice or support do students need to showcase the product(s) and learning?

B. Showcase—What is the appropriate structure or format for the products to be presented? How will students explain their transfer of learning to people beyond the classroom?

C. Closing Reflection & Celebration—How will students individually reflect on learning and growth and celebrate with others?

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THE 3 CS OF QUALITY ENTRY EVENTS IN PBL: Create a launch that inspires, informs, and engages

A strong entry event sets the tone for your entire project. Done well, it captures attention, sparks thought, and fosters lasting motivation. Use the 3 Cs: Clarity, Curiosity, and Commitment, to plan an unforgettable launch.

Get our free Project Launch Planner

Download the PDF or Google Doc template to design impactful entry events.

CLARITY

Help students understand the purpose and direction of the project.

A quality entry event sets the stage by clearly presenting the learning goals, outlining the challenge, and showing why the work matters.

Try This:

- Invite an expert to introduce the real-world context
- Use role-play to simulate an issue or scenario
- Share a case study that mirrors the project challenge

CURIOSITY

Spark wonder, surprise, and inquiry.

Spark student questions by introducing just enough information to highlight gaps and generate interest.

Try This:

- Present surprising data or conflicting perspectives
- Use a mystery box with clues or artifacts
- Show a short video that challenges assumptions

COMMITMENT

Foster emotional connection and personal relevance.

Move beyond excitement by building student investment through empathy and authentic purpose.

Try This:

- Interview stakeholders affected by the issue
- Plan a field trip connected to the topic
- Show how students' work can make a real-world impact

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PRO TIP

Don't stop after the launch! Carry the 3 Cs throughout the project. Sustained clarity, curiosity, and commitment keep students engaged and driven to do meaningful work.

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3 KEYS TO ACTIONABLE ASSESSMENT IN PBL

Make learning visible, support all students, and strengthen your project

In project-based learning, assessment is part of the learning process, not an endpoint. When students receive timely, targeted feedback, they stay engaged, build confidence, and produce stronger work. These three strategies help transform assessment from a focus on grading to one on growth.

1 ASSESS ALONG THE WAY

Use formative checks to guide learning, not just evaluate it.

Why it matters in PBL: Final products often mask misunderstandings, especially when students lean on peers or group support. Early and ongoing checks help ensure students build the knowledge and skills they'll need.

Student Benefits: Builds readiness, reduces stress, and supports the development of stronger products.

How to do it: Use quick quizzes, skill-based mini tasks, and observe collaboration or creativity in action.

Pro Tip: Track learning across content, skills, and competencies to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

2 MAKE ASSESSMENT TRANSPARENT

Clarify the path to success with visible goals and aligned tools.

Why it matters in PBL: Projects can feel overwhelming without a clear map. When students understand the purpose behind tasks, how they'll be assessed, and what success looks like, they're more motivated and more self-directed.

Student Benefits: Increases clarity, motivation, and ownership.

How to do it: Use "I can" targets, aligned rubrics, success criteria, and visible project calendars.

Pro Tip: Shift from grades to "evidence of learning" and next steps.

3 FEEDBACK FOR GROWTH

Make time and space for reflection, revision, and growth.

Why it matters in PBL: The heart of PBL is improvement through iteration. Feedback only matters if students can act on it, and that requires intentional planning and support.

Student Benefits: Deepens learning, builds resilience, and encourages a growth mindset.

How to do it: Plan feedback protocols and revision time, model peer feedback, and support reflection.

Pro Tip: Build in flexible days for catch-up and targeted support.

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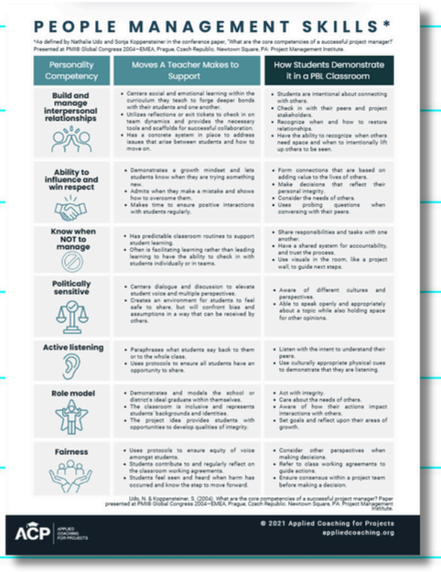
Implementation Tools

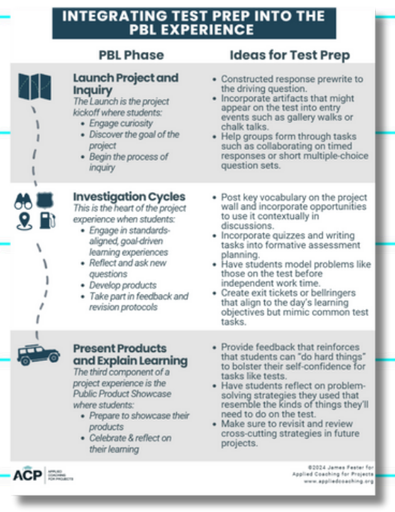
These one-pagers support you during the day-to-day of running a project. From classroom management to balancing test prep and meeting diverse learner needs, these tools help make PBL more doable for every student.

01 People Management Skills



This chart helps you manage your classroom through relationships by connecting your moves to what students do in a PBL setting.

02 Integrating Test Prep into the PBL Experience



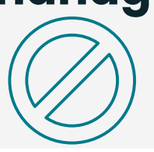
You can integrate skill practice into each phase of a project without sacrificing engagement, so you don't have to choose between test prep and PBL.

03 8 Tips to Get Started with PBL in Special Education

This resource highlights ways to adapt PBL for students with diverse learning needs. An excellent tool for SPED teachers or anyone working to make PBL more inclusive in their classroom.

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT SKILLS*

*As defined by Nathalie Udo and Sonja Koppensteiner in the conference paper, "What are the core competencies of a successful project manager?' Presented at PMI® Global Congress 2004—EMEA, Prague, Czech Republic. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

Personality Competency	Moves A Teacher Makes to Support	How Students Demonstrate it in a PBL Classroom
Build and manage interpersonal relationships	• Centers social and emotional learning within the curriculum they teach to forge deeper bonds with their students and one another. • Utilizes reflections or exit tickets to check in on team dynamics and provides the necessary tools and scaffolds for successful collaboration. • Has a concrete system in place to address issues that arise between students and how to move on.	• Students are intentional about connecting with others. • Check in with their peers and project stakeholders. • Recognize when and how to restore relationships. • Have the ability to recognize when others need space and when to intentionally lift up others to be seen.
Ability to influence and win respect	• Demonstrates a growth mindset and lets students know when they are trying something new. • Admits when they make a mistake and shows how to overcome them. • Makes time to ensure positive interactions with students regularly.	• Form connections that are based on adding value to the lives of others. • Make decisions that reflect their personal integrity. • Consider the needs of others. • Uses probing questions when conversing with their peers.
Know when NOT to manage 	• Has predictable classroom routines to support student learning. • Often is facilitating learning rather than leading learning to have the ability to check in with students individually or in teams.	• Share responsibilities and tasks with one another. • Have a shared system for accountability, and trust the process. • Use visuals in the room, like a project wall, to guide next steps.
Politically sensitive	• Centers dialogue and discussion to elevate student voice and multiple perspectives. • Creates an environment for students to feel safe to share, but will confront bias and assumptions in a way that can be received by others.	• Aware of different cultures and perspectives. • Able to speak openly and appropriately about a topic while also holding space for other opinions.
Active listening	• Paraphrases what students say back to them or to the whole class. • Uses protocols to ensure all students have an opportunity to share.	• Listen with the intent to understand their peers. • Use culturally appropriate physical cues to demonstrate that they are listening.
Role model	• Demonstrates and models the school or district's ideal graduate within themselves. • The classroom is inclusive and represents students' backgrounds and identities. • The project idea provides students with opportunities to develop qualities of integrity.	• Act with integrity. • Care about the needs of others. • Aware of how their actions impact interactions with others. • Set goals and reflect upon their areas of growth.
Fairness	• Uses protocols to ensure equity of voice amongst students. • Students contribute to and regularly reflect on the classroom working agreements. • Students feel seen and heard when harm has occurred and know the step to move forward.	• Consider other perspectives when making decisions. • Refer to class working agreements to guide actions. • Ensure consensus within a project team before making a decision.

Udo, N. & Koppensteiner, S. (2004). What are the core competencies of a successful project manager? Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2004—EMEA, Prague, Czech Republic. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

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INTEGRATING TEST PREP INTO THE PBL EXPERIENCE

PBL Phase	Ideas for Test Prep
Launch Project and Inquiry *The Launch is the project kickoff where students:* • *Engage curiosity* • *Discover the goal of the project* • *Begin the process of inquiry*	• Constructed response prewrite to the driving question. • Incorporate artifacts that might appear on the test into entry events such as gallery walks or chalk talks. • Help groups form through tasks such as collaborating on timed responses or short multiple-choice question sets.
Investigation Cycles *This is the heart of the project experience when students:* • *Engage in standards-aligned, goal-driven learning experiences* • *Reflect and ask new questions* • *Develop products* • *Take part in feedback and revision protocols*	• Post key vocabulary on the project wall and incorporate opportunities to use it contextually in discussions. • Incorporate quizzes and writing tasks into formative assessment planning. • Have students model problems like those on the test before independent work time. • Create exit tickets or bellringers that align to the day's learning objectives but mimic common test tasks.
Present Products and Explain Learning *The third component of a project experience is the Public Product Showcase where students:* • *Prepare to showcase their products* • *Celebrate & reflect on their learning*	• Provide feedback that reinforces that students can "do hard things" to bolster their self-confidence for tasks like tests. • Have students reflect on problem-solving strategies they used that resemble the kinds of things they'll need to do on the test. • Make sure to revisit and review cross-cutting strategies in future projects.

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8 TIPS TO GET STARTED WITH PBL IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Shift the Mindet

All students can contribute when provided with the right supports, such as utilizing multiple Lexile levels, discussion protocols, and communication devices to ensure access.

Create a Shared Vision

Identify the real-world skills students need beyond the school environment, such as collaboration, problem-solving, decision-making, and effective communication.

Identify a Relevant Problem

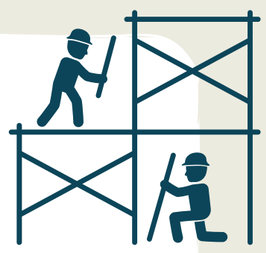
Find challenges that matter to students with disabilities, such as feeling excluded, discomfort during fire drills, and a lack of peer interactions.

Develop a Driving Question

Frame an accessible, meaningful question to start the inquiry process for students, such as “How can we help all students feel included in our school community?”

Design for Access

Provide multiple ways for students to participate and communicate, such as visual supports, speech-generating devices, peer-assisted discussions, and additional strategies that remove barriers.



Scaffold the Process

Break it into steps and model participation, such as creating a slideshow where students with disabilities introduce themselves using communication devices.

Create a Meaningful Product

Ensure student work impacts the community and they can all contribute, such as a school-wide art installation with thumbprints from all students

Reflect and Celebrate

Help students recognize their growth, such as how their fire drill interactions improved and how their communication skills grew

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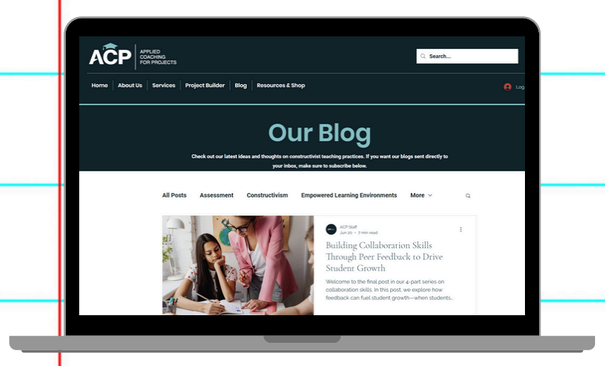
Explore More & Take Action

You have the starter pack, now it's time to make it work for you. Explore each one-pager in greater detail through our blog, and when you are ready for more, visit our resource shop to find ready-to-use tools that will bring high-quality PBL to life

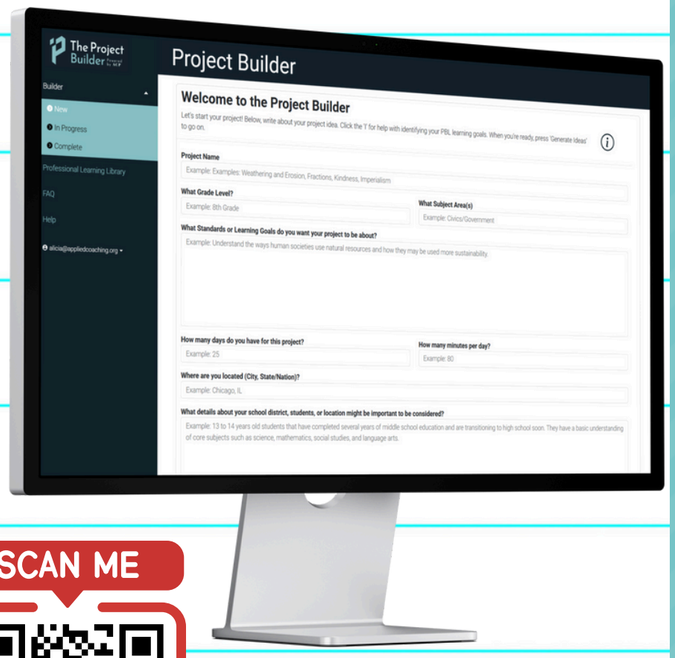
01 Top 5 Mistakes New PBL Teachers Make

Looking for a final check before you begin? This page highlights five common mistakes new PBL teachers make and provides tips to avoid them. Use it to reflect or support your team.

Explore Our Blog 02



For deeper insights into the topics in this starter pack, visit our blog at appliedcoaching.org for the corresponding article and get more insights and tips!



SCAN ME

03 Ready to Design Your Own Project

The Project Builder uses AI to do the heavy lifting, guiding you step by step to create a PBL experience tailored to your ideas. You have full editing access at every stage, so you can truly make it your own. **Start your free 1-week trial and bring your next project to life with clarity and confidence.**

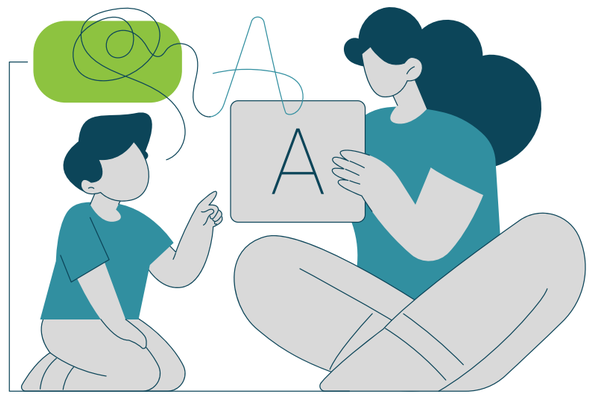
TOP 5

Mistakes New PBL Teachers Make

and what to do instead

1

Treating PBL as a Final Product Instead of a Learning Process



Ask most adults if they liked projects in school, and the answer is usually no. Why? Because most projects were saved until the end of a unit, and they felt like an add-on at best, and busy work at worst. **Instead, make the project the unit itself so it becomes the driving force behind learning. Students should build knowledge *through* the project, not after it.**

2

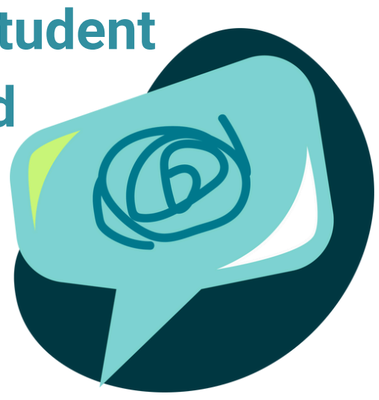
Planning Every Minute Without Flexibility

It’s natural to want a solid and complete plan, but overplanning can stifle student voice. **Instead, try emergent planning by leaving 10-15% of your time open for student ideas, discoveries, and surprises. It creates space for voice, choice, and deeper engagement.**

3

Overcomplicating the Project Idea

We know you want to create a memorable project, but too much complexity can lead to fatigue, lower engagement, and a risk of never attempting another one. **Instead, start small and meaningful. Focus on relevance, student connection, and quality over complexity.**



4

Not Aligning Your Standards

It's easy to get excited about a creative project idea, but if it doesn't align with our standards, it can feel disconnected, shallow, and have little impact. **Instead, ground your project in a few high-leverage standards to ensure students build deep understanding as they learn, apply, and demonstrate their skills.**

5

Neglecting Collaboration Structures

Telling students to “work together” isn’t enough. Without structure, collaboration can quickly become off-task or one-sided, as some voices can dominate. **Instead, explicitly teach collaboration by utilizing roles and routines that promote shared responsibility and meaningful participation.**

What’s Next

Check out appliedcoaching.org for more tips!

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