

# Project-Based Learning: Students' perspectives in project assessment in cross-cultural studies classes at Dong Thap University

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**Abstract:** Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a positive teaching and learning method that was applied in cross-cultural studies for English majors at Dong Thap University. This study was aimed to explore students' perspectives regarding conventional assessment (which means only teachers assess students' learning in this research) as well as their ideas when they could participate in assessing their learning process in PBL. The research findings show that while students trust their teachers' assessment if teachers alone evaluate their learning projects, they highly appreciate that they can be part of the assessment process.

**Keywords:** Project-based learning, students' perspectives, project assessment, cross-cultural studies

## 1. Introduction

PBL is a progressive method of teaching and learning in which learners actively search for knowledge following their driving questions. While it is considered beneficial for learners, PBL implementation also faces several challenges. One of them assessing learning projects. As it is a learner-centered approach that result in authentic learning outcomes, assessing learning projects also needs to change accordingly. Traditionally, teachers are responsible for assessing their students. This may raise concerns of subjectivity in assessment of students' learning process in PBL. As projects' products are to be shared with others, all stakeholders involved should have their voices in the assessment process. This study was aimed to explore students' perspectives of (1) conventional assessment with teachers as the mere assessors and (2) a new way of assessment in which they could be part of the process through qualitative research.

## 2. Contents

### 2.1. Literature review on project-based learning (PBL)

#### a. Project-based learning: definition, benefits, and challenges

Although PBL has widely been used in education and is claimed to be an effective and positive teaching and learning method to foster learners' 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, there is a lack of consensus about how PBL is defined (Hovey & Ferguson, 2014). Among the various definitions, this research used

the one of PBL by Bell (2010). Accordingly, PBL is a learner-centered teaching and learning method in which learners carry out their own research to answer their driving questions. This learning process undergoes teachers' support and supervision. PBL enable learners to conduct their own in-depth studies on certain topics and then share their final products with others through a written report or an oral presentation.

PBL is considered to bring about several benefits for learners. PBL is a cooperative learning method fostering learners' sharing of ideas and knowledge as well as stimulating learners' interests to look for answers to challenging study questions (Stoller, 2002). According to a research summary by Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (2009), PBL is believed to result in positive effects on students' content knowledge, high levels of students' engagement, students' improved critical thinking, problem-solving and collaborative skills. Those are just a few of the various benefits that PBL has to offer.

Despite being praised for its significance in teaching and learning, like many other teaching approaches and methods, there are challenges facing teachers and students in PBL. Studies by Pasi et al (2022), Sumarni (2015), Hovey and Ferguson (2014), and Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (2009) pointed out several challenges in implementing PBL in educational contexts. Challenges related to PBL, according to the studies,

involve teachers' methodologies in using PBL, students' group dynamics, project assessment and project authentic assessment design, and weaker students' compromise in groups just to name a few. Those challenges raise issues that need to be taken into consideration to enhance success and effectiveness of PBL implementation in educational settings.

#### *b. Assessing students' learning projects*

As mentioned above, students' learning project assessment is one of the challenges facing PBL implementation. Pasi et al (2022) analyzed in their research that learning project assessment is one of the top risks that may fail PBL. Fitriati (2016) stated that in traditional pedagogies, learners are viewed as passive knowledge receivers. PBL, in contrast, is believed to enable students to be explorers of knowledge. Therefore, applying traditional assessment methods in PBL is usually unsuitable. Instead, PBL needs to have new assessment methods compatible with authentic outcomes of students' learning process. Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (2009) synthesized in their PBL research summary that the problem with project assessment is that it is difficult to design authentic assessment for PBL.

Regarding students' participation and their perspectives on project assessment, in assessing learning projects, little research has been found in the literature. Therefore, this study was aimed to find out some input when students actively took part in assessing their own learning projects through their self-assessment and peer assessment together with the teacher.

## **2.2. The study**

### *a. PBL in the cross-cultural studies classes and the research participants*

Each cross-cultural studies class in the Foreign Language Faculty at DThU consists of 30 class periods (50 minutes for each period), organized throughout a schedule of 15 weeks with two periods for a week (one class meeting time). These classes are organized mainly for third-year English majors whose English language skills are supposed to be sufficient to participate in classes such as American culture, British culture, and cross-cultural studies. This study was conducted in all two classes administered in the faculty for the academic year with 94 students. PBL was applied in those two

classes with students being divided into groups of four or five. Each group was randomly assigned a learning topic described in the course description. For the first few weeks, students met in class to discuss their project work with their teammates and also with the teacher's consultation and support. They were also asked to work extra outside their classrooms to have their projects completed. At the final stage, each group presented their project to the whole class through an oral presentation while other peers took notes. Their peers may ask them questions related to their projects and then they all sat for project evaluation based on a rubric designed by the teacher. The groups that did the presentations conducted their self-assessment through reflections. Similarly, the peers carried out their peer assessment from the views of the audience. Finally, the teacher summarized key points and wrapped up the project for the class.

### *b. The research design*

There were two research questions raised in this study:

How do students view conventional assessment of their learning?

What are students' perspectives on participating in assessing their learning projects?

The research was aimed to explore students' perspectives in project assessment, especially how they viewed conventional assessment (which in this research referred to teacher's assessment as the only assessor) and how they opined when engaging themselves into the assessment process. Therefore, a qualitative study was employed to probe deeply into the research questions.

Two instruments were used to collect data. An online survey was employed to collect a general understanding of the research matters and also to recruit participants for the second round. After the survey, six voluntary participants were invited to sit for an interview separately. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour depending on the interviewees' responses and was audio-recorded. Interview audios then were transcribed and coded following thematic analysis (Creswell, 2014). Emerged themes were used as research findings and reported accordingly.

### *c. Research findings and discussion*

The research findings are reported regarding two issues raised in the research questions: (1) students'

perspectives about conventional assessment and (2) their perspectives when participating in assessing their learning process. As mentioned previously, the online survey helped capture a general understanding of the issues from all participated students in the two classes while the qualitative interviews helped explore deeply the research matters.

The survey showed that most students still trusted conventional assessment (i.e., only teachers conduct assessment). 77.3% of the surveyed students reported the result as they believed that teachers had a deep understanding and sufficient knowledge of the projects they studied. Still, it is interesting to see that students have become aware of more objective learning assessment as 22,7% of them thought that if only one stakeholder, (or teachers) was in charge of the assessment, it was insufficient and subjective since it only conveyed one person's perspective.

When being able to participate in the learning assessment process, 72,7% of the students appreciated the self-assessment as it was fair and they knew clearly their efforts in completing their learning projects. Similarly, 63,6% of the participants highly evaluated the peer assessment as the projects were done to serve learning purposes of the whole class and they were the real audience of the project sharing stage.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews probed deeply into students' perspectives regarding the research matters. There were two major emerged themes including (1) students' appreciation of their participation in the assessment process, and (2) problems and suggestions regarding this participation. For the first matter, students expressed their agreement with the application of self and peer assessment in their learning. The main reason was that it was fair and ensured all stakeholders were involved in assessing their learning. However, this also raised concerns about the fairness and accurateness of the assessment. Their argued that most people would tend to highly rank themselves and peers might also favor some of their close classmates better than others and thus might assess based on personal relationships. Their concerns suggested that there needs to be training for students about assessment. Also, there should be open discussions about assessment results if there are unusual differences among stakeholders to ensure

learning results are assessed more accurately.

### 3. Conclusion

This study brought into consideration the conventional teachers' assessment and students' participation in assessing their own learning process in PBL. PBL was highly favored by students in this research. The findings suggest that students are highly appreciative when they can also be assessors of their own learning, but they still trust teachers to be the main assessors of their learning process. The research findings also suggest that all stakeholders involved in learning in PBL should be represented in the assessment process. Training sessions about learning project assessment for students may lead to more successful and accurate learning assessment in PBL.

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