

How Project-Based Approaches in Literacy Could Go Terribly Wrong (Or Powerfully Right)

by Nell K. Duke

There has been a significant uptick in interest in project-based approaches to education. Some of this may be due to the work of organizations that advocate for project-based work, such as the Buck Institute and the George Lucas Educational Foundation, while some may be due to a growing recognition of the need to provide more engaging education to today's media-enmeshed children and youth. Some could also be due to the perception that project-based approaches can address many Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or develop 21st century skills more broadly.

Whatever the reasons, it is important that we not get swept up in it as a fad, but rather take a thoughtful, evidence-driven approach. Project-based education has lots of potential for literacy development, but also potential pitfalls.

Three ways project-based instruction could go terribly wrong

1. Lack of clear conceptualization.

Literacy has a long history of using terms so differently or broadly that eventually it seems anything "counts." Consider "balanced literacy." To some, this means balancing lots of opportunities to read connected text with explicit instruction in phonics and other knowledge and skills; to others, it means a balance of reading to children, with

children, and by children (following Margaret Mooney's 1990 book); still others apply the label to instruction that does not appear to me to be balanced by either meaning. *Whole language, guided reading, writers' workshop, direct instruction*, and a number of other terms have been used to label a wide variety of approaches and practices that may be quite far from what popularizers of these terms intended.

Project-based learning is in danger of that same semantic spread. For example, I recently heard an assignment in which students were asked to make a diorama related to a book they'd read described as "project based." To address this, I urge all of us who use this or a related label to be very clear in what we mean by it. In my mind, for instruction to be project based, students must work over an extended period of time to meet a purpose beyond

satisfying a school requirement, such as to address a problem or create something to be used in the local community. We do not all need to agree that is a necessary characteristic of project based, but we do need to articulate what we mean by the term.

2. Limited alignment to standards. Today's teachers and students cannot afford to spend large amounts of time engaged in an activity unaligned with standards. But standards have not been a substantial emphasis in much of the instantiation of project-based approaches. Instruction must be carefully designed to address specific standards while maintaining the characteristics that make it project based.

Anne-Lise Halvorsen and colleagues described the development of standards-aligned projects in a 2012



article in *Theory & Research in Social Education*. One involved second-graders visiting a local park, identifying strengths and deficiencies of the park, and then developing a proposal to present to a government official about making improvements. Project lessons addressed a number of standards in reading, writing, and social studies, such as CCSS 5 for Reading Informational Text, about text features, CCSS 1 for Writing, about writing opinion pieces, and Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations for Social Studies, involving identifying issues in the local community that influence the daily lives of its citizens.

Children who experienced this and another 20-session project-based unit showed pre- to post-term gains on standards-aligned measures, with effect sizes of 1.31 for reading, 0.52 for writing, and 0.85 for social studies (all reported in Cohen's *d*). In fact, the children who were from low-socioeconomic status (SES), low-performing schools performed in informational reading and social studies at levels statistically equivalent to students from high-SES, high-performing schools. This suggests the promise of designing projects aligned with standards in multiple domains.

3. Lack of explicit, systematic instruction. Project-based approaches have been linked to discovery learning, with little or no emphasis on explicit, systematic instruction. This is a poor fit to literacy education, in which there is overwhelming evidence in favor of explicit, systematic instruction in a number of areas, including comprehension and writing, both of which are entailed in many projects.

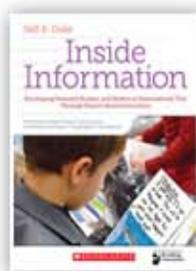
We must ensure projects incorporate explicit, systematic instruction. I choose to use the term “project-based instruction” rather than “project-based learning” to emphasize the importance of instruction in project-based approaches. Project-based instruction can be seen as an overarching context in which we can place a number of research-supported instructional practices. For example, with a project in which students research animals and write articles about them for a

magazine to be placed at a local pediatrician's office, the teacher might provide explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, text structure, and revision strategies, all of which have considerable research support.

How project-based instruction could go powerfully right

With these challenges, one might question whether it is worthwhile. In my view, it is. A project-based context provides students with opportunities to read and write for a purpose beyond simply learning to read and write—which research suggests is associated with greater reading and writing growth. A project-based context enables students to write for an audience beyond their teacher, which is associated with higher quality writing. A project-based context provides a way to incorporate a number of characteristics of more engaging instruction (e.g., relevance, choice, collaboration, autonomy, mastery goals), which a number of researchers have established to be associated with stronger literacy outcomes.

It is well worth the delicate dance to take advantage of the affordances of project-based instruction while avoiding its many potential pitfalls. ■

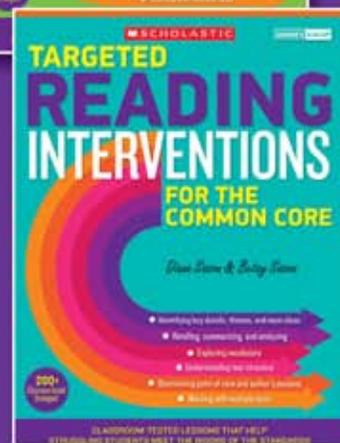
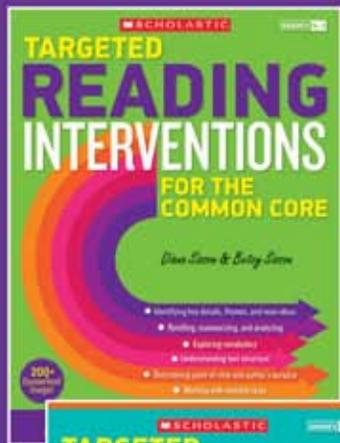


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