

# 'Project-based learning has shed its 1970s look and is making a comeback'

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*Louise Thomas, education programme lead with the Innovation Unit, writes:*

"Projects" has long been a dirty word in education in the UK. Like flares and Swedish pop music, projects were tainted by perceptions of the 1970s. Interchangeable with topic/themed/cross-curricular learning, it can be hard to know what "project based" really means.

Whatever the truths or the myths of what went on in schools in the 1970s, the kind of project-based learning enjoying a resurgence in schools today is quite different. Today's project-based learning requires rigorous design processes, deep subject knowledge, and an expectation that all students produce high-quality work measured by adult world standards.

What have become known as Real Projects are reclaiming the term for the 21st century. And now they are subject to the scrutiny of a randomised control trial funded by Education Endowment Foundation.

Real Projects undertaken by schools have involved students carrying out rigorous scientific research into contamination levels in local waterways, students lobbying local government to change housing policy on the basis of statistical analyses carried out on health impacts, publishing books to support the learning of younger students or presenting their achievements in public meetings. At School 21, led by Peter Hyman, students have designed a classroom for their new school that has been built into architectural plans.

What they have in common is that every Real Project requires students to acquire significant academic knowledge. And every Real Project must also have an authentic audience and a public exhibition of student work so that students know why they are learning, and their teachers know whether they have really understood it.

So what is so different about today's Real Projects?

First, the possibilities. We know more about learning and about teaching than we did and the information revolution has freed teachers from their role as the sole repositories of information. This means we are able to design learning experiences that speak to what we know about great learning. Further, technology has transformed not only what young people can do, make and build, but also the visibility of what they do to the wider world.

Too often students save their best efforts for their websites, YouTube creations, and musical pursuits outside of school, treating work undertaken in the classroom lightly because the work there doesn't matter except for the grade it receives from the teacher.

Second, the outcomes. Project-based learning schools such as High Tech High in California are not satisfied that students should do well on public tests or merely graduate from high school. The goal is for every student to be offered a place at university (whether or not students choose to take it up), to graduate from university, and progress into a career. Their former students massively outperform state averages on every count.

And there are wider expectations beyond this in terms of student achievement in the real world.

Third, the rigour. What does rigour in education mean? Robust comparability of students and of schools? Reliable ways of knowing what students can recall on a specific day? The acquisition of knowledge? These rigours are necessary but insufficient. There is growing interest in rigour defined by depth of learning – not learning for the test, but rigorous learning for understanding. Learning to think, learning to debate, learning to form opinions. Even more than that, we should demand rigour that expects students to produce work of high quality that stands up in the world outside school.

Why are schools going for this approach?

Our education system, like many others around the world, has got better and better at meeting standards and benchmarks disconnected from the real world. More students are passing tests and gaining higher qualifications, yet many colleges, universities and employers still raise concerns that these young people are not well-prepared for further study or the world of work. Some say that students are not independent learners, they struggle to think for themselves, they are not resilient, motivated or engaged; they struggle with real-world challenges. And worse still, there is now evidence that these higher qualifications are no longer the guarantee of good jobs, higher earnings and career progression that they once were.

The Innovation Unit has been overwhelmed with requests for help running Real Projects from schools that have higher aspirations for their learners than scraping a C at GCSE. These schools know that students who are deeply engaged in their learning, who really care about the outcomes, who connect with the rigour of the adult world and who are taught by teachers passionate about their projects will get good grades anyway. These schools are using Real Projects to provide a bridge between success in the world of school and success in the world beyond.

*For more information on how your school could get involved in the world's largest randomised controlled trial of project-based learning contact [kim.schilling@innovationunit.org](mailto:kim.schilling@innovationunit.org).*