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A Project-Based Learning Approach to Developing English Writing Courses in Colleges

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Abstract: This paper describes how the PBL approach is integrated into English writing courses in colleges and focuses on the process of designing and implementing a writing project via PBL. This allows for the promotion of innovation in the English writing curriculum as well as the active participation among college students, thereby strengthening the cultivation of students' self-learning ability and improving their ability to apply knowledge flexibly in real-life settings.

Keywords: PBL approach; English writing; Curriculum design

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1. Introduction

A well-established curriculum design is the foundation for successful teaching. In regard to English writing, the traditional teaching model is a curriculum-based teaching model, in which the classroom is the main venue, the textbook offers teaching content, and the purpose of teaching is to impart knowledge and skills to the students. Project-based learning (PBL) is a practical teaching model, and its core educational concept focuses on designing basic training and principles to guide students through meaningful tasks so that they can actively and independently acquire knowledge. The theoretical roots of the PBL approach go back a little further, principally to Dewey's idea that teaching should focus on guiding students to engage in self-directed, intentional inquiry of real-world problems [1]. The advantages of this approach are as follows: (1) students develop motivation and take responsibility for their own learning; (2) they construct their own knowledge and understanding in an integrated way; (3) knowledge is sustainable over a long period of time; (4) students learn to communicate through problem solving; (5) they experience a variety of learning tasks; and (6) they receive a response to their learning needs [2].

PBL can be referred to as a learning and teaching approach through the use of projects based on a highly attractive and motivating question, task, or problem [3]. PBL has been explored in various education levels and institutions [4-17]. The use of the PBL refers to a teaching method that divides the object to be taught into various groups based upon the characteristics of students' physical and mental development and separates the subject knowledge into several projects to maintain the teaching requirements as well as to meet the actual needs of the society for students. Students carry out educational teaching around the developed projects, allowing themselves to directly participate in the learning activities of the entire project. PBL emphasizes cooperative learning and strengthens the training of extracurricular knowledge, thus improving the collaboration between groups in the teaching process and extending the course content from inside to outside the school to a great extent. Importantly, students actively participate in group discussions and naturally comprehend the teaching content when guided by their teachers.

PBL can be a motivating factor for students who might not otherwise be as successful as they are capable of. Developing curiosity is a natural course of project-based learning, and it can be argued that formative assessments that are conducted throughout the program yield as much information as summative assessment assignments or projects. PBL organizes learning around a project or a complex task that is triggered by an in-depth question. Students, especially in higher education settings, are encouraged to self-direct their learning. Learning paths become curricular as concepts are absorbed and ideas are developed and linked to outcomes. Often, topics begin broadly, and then narrow as students delve deeper into the material and discover intricacies, they were previously unaware of. "Starting with the end in mind" is a phrase that reflects the introductory phase of a project. In general, PBL is larger and broader in scope than traditional assignments, but it may range from a few days to a semester long, depending on the pedagogical motivation for grasping a concept or embracing an entire topic. Unlike traditional and passive learning tasks, the PBL approach acknowledges and values unpredictable outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to show how the PBL approach is implemented in an English writing course, paving the way for comprehensive talents equipped with skills such as teamwork and problem solving to gradually emerge.

2. Teaching objectives

The three-dimensional teaching objectives of the PBL approach in an English writing course are knowledge objective, competence objective, and emotional objective. As for knowledge objective, students can use words, phrases, paragraphs, or essays to understand the properties of different types of writing, styles, and rhetorical skills. In terms of competency objective, group work and practical exercises are the most effective strategies for students to improve their writing skills. Through analysis, comparison and contrast, classification, generalization, reasoning, analogy, as well as other methods, students can develop self-learning, reflection, creativity, and intercultural competency, as well as the ability to interact with others. Emotional objective requires students to be willing to listen to the varied perspectives of people during the activity and to utilize them to revise their own points of view. In writing inquiry activities, students are encouraged to interact with others, actively participate in dialogues and conversations, as well as respect the feelings and views of others.

3. The composition

The composition of the PBL curriculum requires an effective and successful curriculum design based on three characteristics.

3.1. Theme and project

Before commencing the project, students must first comprehend the project's objectives and recognize the knowledge and skills required, acknowledging that they will help them achieve the final project's objectives. Significantly, relevant learning objectives should be presented to students to stimulate their interest in studying. The teaching objectives of a writing course using the PBL approach should be established with clear, defined, and actionable goals in order to describe and pin down the end state of learning behavior after a series of PBL activities.

3.2. Learning environment

The writing course using the PBL approach aims at providing a learning environment that is closely tied to students' lives, reinforcing their abilities to apply existing knowledge to solve problems that will arise in the future. When designing the learning environment, the following principles should be applied: (1) the teacher should clarify the goals or objectives of the learning process, as well as the goals of the completed

project; (2) the teacher should ensure that the contents are relevant to students' lives, and emphasize the importance of problem solving when handling a project, in accordance with the designed theme; simply put, the learning environment created should inspire students to tackle challenges in the project and motivate them to work harder to find a solution; (3) every student should be participating in the learning process, and each student's role and task should be clear.

3.3. Learning tasks

The extent to which a thematic course is undertaken is determined by the design of the learning tasks. Learning tasks should be designed in groups and also in assignments so that students can brainstorm and exert creativity in various ways. Learning tasks can be designed in line with the following principles: (1) a spiral structure can be used to divide the entire task into smaller modules, with clear guidelines for students to explore how to acquire knowledge and solve problems; (2) teaching should be done in small groups, with each student's learning task clearly defined; (3) the teacher works with the learning needs of the students and guides them with flowcharts, mind maps, etc., as well as offers essential resources and timely guidance; cameras can also be provided to students to record their learning process if needed; (4) in addition to allowing students to process and display their learning through texts or presentations, it is recommended that a teacher assists the students in recording their entire learning process so that they can share their learning process with other students and provide feedback to each other.

The essence of "learning" in PBL is student-centered learning. Students are the decision makers of their own learning, and they participate directly in the learning process: from information gathering, plan development, solution selection, goal achievement, feedback, and outcome assessment, up to the active construction of one's knowledge by solving problems and tasks. Furthermore, cooperative learning is essential and vital. In PBL, the members of each team are required to complement each other's strengths to complete diverse learning by helping and sharing with one another, as well as to work collaboratively toward a common goal. In so doing, they not only share wisdom and contribute what they have learned independently, but also learn from the collaboration to improve their knowledge system and construction. For teachers, the most important thing is to be able to tap into and mobilize the interaction of students to promote independent and collaborative learning.

Teachers should assist students in developing or adapting projects in a way that allows them to have freedom of choice, while ensuring that the project are aligned with the curriculum standards and that PBL is integrated in all teaching and learning activities. Teachers can use performance-based assessment to assess students' performance as well as their ability to integrate knowledge and skills to solve real-world problems. They should also encourage students to assess each other and reflect on the teaching objectives, learning processes, as well as the learning outcomes.

4. Case study

Projects provide students opportunities to revisit questions, ideas, and problems throughout their PBL experience, "which is the key to deepening their evolving understanding of course topics" [18]. Projects should also be authentic and purposeful to students. The rationale and context for the project must also be authentic in terms of making explicit connections to real-world practices used by the disciplinary community and by the wider community where students live, as well as personally meaningful to the student [19]. "They are not sporadic activities or culminating activities that come at the end of an instructional sequence, nor are they lively interludes inserted periodically into traditional recitation [20]." A growing number of researchers support the use of PBL in schools to engage students, reduce absenteeism, stimulate collaborative learning, and promote academic performance. The following section discusses a project that mirrors a college English writing course, with the theme "How to make a good claim in an argumentative

essay?".

4.1. Project composition

The unit title is "How to make a good claim in an argumentative essay?", and the question is "What are the elements of a good claim?". The following is the description of the unit: the knowledge and skills of persuasion are necessary in various situations, from discussing with a colleague, bargaining a price, and giving a speech.

Students have the impression that persuasions are indispensable, but many of them are not as solid as students think they are. So, what makes a good claim? What are the elements of a good claim in an argumentative essay? In order to tackle the task, students need to first understand three questions. First, what is a claim? Second, what are the elements of a good claim in an argument? Third, how to develop a specific topic, make a relevant claim, and argue for or against it? The content of the project is as follows: students need to explore the elements of a good claim, refer to relevant information, and summarize the necessary elements; they need to learn to explain the elements of a good claim based on explorations and surveys, and understand what claims of fact, claims of value, and claims of policy are, as well as how to represent those claims with flowcharts or drawings; they also need to investigate good claims to convince their peers about an issue.

4.2. Tasks

In this case, there are three tasks: (1) students are divided into groups of six; the group leader then divides the work – three students collect and explain information, one student creates videos, another reports, and the last student records; (2) the students characterize and generalize the elements of a good claim through exploration in text, on the internet, and in life; (3) students look for more information or consult experts to determine if their generalization or hypothesis is correct.

4.3. Teaching process

There are five stages in the teaching process: (1) for writing inquiry activities, the teacher first shows a footage or a picture of which a group of people are discussing a topic and asks the students to think about what is happening in the scenario, allowing them to make their own assumptions; (2) a student in each group subsequently records down their assumptions followed by a discussion among the group members; (3) the teacher then clarifies the entry point for learning by asking questions, such as "Why do they argue?", "How to win an argument?", "How to make a good claim in an argument?", and "What are the elements of a good claim in an argument essay?"; (4) each group is required to search for the answers over a week period before sharing and reviewing the results with class; the whole process is videotaped; (5) the teacher summarizes and illustrates each group's performance via logs or videotapes; through discussion among groups, students then correct their exploratory findings, and each group finally reports their survey results.

4.4. Summary and assessment

In the final part, the teacher explains what a good claim is and what elements of a good claim are in an argument essay to set the stage for showing how to develop a specific topic, make a relevant claim, and argue for or against it in an essay. The teacher also provides an assessment and summary along with the students' self-assessment and summary within their groups.

5. Conclusion

PBL provides an environment for students to develop their innovative competence, analysis and synthesis skills, as well as capability to work with other students. PBL requires students to learn through projects,

and these projects are the motivation for learning; the materials used help develop comprehensive thinking and problem-solving skills. Through PBL, students act as the main body of learning, and they complete the project through group cooperation, thus greatly enhancing their learning motivation and effectiveness. This paper described the features and advantages of PBL and provided a case study of PBL implementation in hope that they will be useful for PBL and English writing.

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