Pluses of PBL

PBL has pushed me and students to understand what I'm teaching and why. Students, colleagues and I appreciate the clarity in learning that comes from identifying proficiencies (such as reading, writing, speaking & listening--each of which is broken down further); understanding the target, or level of proficiency goal, for different marking periods; and reporting on these specific areas at the end of marking periods, as opposed to one general numerical grade. Some students embrace the task of working on specific proficiencies.

I am pleased with my school's practice of teachers setting a due date followed by a deadline for many assignments. Take an essay in my class. When a student submits their essay on the due date, I then score the essay according to the identified proficiencies. (For an argumentative essay: claim, evidence, analysis, organization, voice/tone, G.U.M., and revision). After students receive their scores and my comments about their essay, I meet with students who are interested in discussing their essays. We look together at their writing and how to improve it. The proficiencies help us focus our discussion. Students who improve their work before the deadline I've set for revision may improve their scores for the end of the marking period/course. If they don't meet the deadline, students still may work on the assignment, within a period of time, to improve their understanding, proficiency scores, and even grade.

I appreciate that students are not burdened by averages in classes--rather, the reports they receive represent what they are able to do at various endpoints/marking periods. This is particularly equitable because students from homes where education is valued/modeled/ supported are at an advantage in terms of playing the role of student. Those from homes unlike these are at a disadvantage. Sometimes it takes these students longer to meet academic expectations.

Areas to Improve PBL

I'd like to divorce PBL reporting from class credits and numerical grades--let's truly report students' proficiencies. Students should be able to work on these proficiencies in a variety of places and ways within and beyond the walls of the school. I'd like to see Tech Centers and Early College embrace proficiencies to match what we do in high school.

I believe that if time is a variable in learning, which is a principle of PBL, then we need to move away from people viewing high school as a four-year experience. At this point, students and parents regard students as failing if they do not graduate from high school within four years of starting. However, many students enter high school below the proficiency levels they should be at; therefore, it's almost an impossible task for them to truly meet proficiency expectations by the time they graduate.

I'd like to continue to focus on advancing students' work ethic. Since students are not penalized at all for late work, some have become very casual about meeting due dates and deadlines. Perhaps we're in a period of adjustment from a compliance system in which penalties applied (e.g. points taken off a late paper and/or a late paper not accepted by a teacher). Perhaps as time passes, our students will no longer recall the old system, so students' work ethic will adjust positively. Or we need to figure out ways to help students care more about what we call Scholarly Habits (Perseverance, Learning Strategies, Mindset, and Social Skills).

I have taught high school English and humanities at Peoples Academy since 1993. I earned a BA in American Studies from Williams College in 1982, an MEd from the University of Vermont in 1985, and a Certificate of Advanced Studies from Johnson State College (JSC) in 2008. The degree from JSC was the culmination of work at Peoples Academy in Teaching All Secondary Students (TASS). TASS introduced me to Backwards Design and PBL. Our school district continues to provide PBL professional development. Last year I collaborated with two colleagues on how to improve students' work ethic.