

### **I used to think...**

I used to think that I held very high expectations of my students and that I was empowering them to be lifelong learners and to succeed in the world outside of my classroom. I had a rather negative view of project based learning - I had seen it (or something claiming to be PBL) done badly far too many times. I used to think that PBL was a younger years KS3 gimmick which was rapidly going out of fashion and could never be used to deliver lessons for older students especially those about to take GCSEs and A Levels.

Despite my concerns and my belief that my teaching was already 'outstanding' (whatever that means) I wanted to buy into the ethos of School 21 and this meant experimenting with REAL Projects. When we started to plan our first project, I was incredibly sceptical and almost dismissed all of the advice I was given - I thought it was an American gimmick which would never stand up to the rigours of the British education system and Ofsted.

I was also worried that my students would not be engaged in the topic because they wouldn't have the 'pleasure' of me bouncing around the front of my classroom telling funny anecdotes about WWI - they wouldn't have my 'outstanding' teaching! Additionally, I was worried that they would not develop the incredibly important essay writing skills (which they would need to pass exams) as no one would be teaching it to them. My final worry was time - I was concerned that we were spending a whole term on a topic I could have got through in a few lessons!

I used to start planning my units of work based on the idea that students couldn't do what I wanted them to. For example, I would have to teach students how to evaluate the reliability of sources and then let them apply what I had taught them.

### **And then I saw...**

My fears seemed to be entirely justified during the first few experiments with REAL Project lessons. The lessons took an entirely different form to what my students and I were used to and I, honestly, struggled to 'let go' as a teacher. But, I kept on continually reflecting, reading the theory and seeking advice from those more experienced than me. The more I read and investigated, the more I wanted to keep fighting to try to make it work. I am glad I did.

After a few lessons, I started to realise how genuinely engaged my students were in the lessons and just how much they started to progress in both knowledge and skills (both subject specific skills, such as essay writing, and also the 'softer' inter-personal skills). I saw them working calmly, professionally and independently in a way I never imagined they would. I started to sit with students one to one each lesson for a good length of

time and really, deeply, critique their work and hold them to account. I started to really understand the needs of all of the students in my class and was able to tailor my feedback in a much more individualised way than I ever had previously. I was able to mark students' books with them sat in front of me and question them about their knowledge in real depth and correct any misconceptions, or encourage them to think more about concepts if they had 'got it'.

I saw, most worryingly, how low my expectations had been in the past! I started to see that a vast majority of my class could do this without me teaching them (except providing them with some graphic organisers) and indeed, some of them could already evaluate sources much more effectively than I planned to teach them. I was then able to concentrate my teaching on those who needed it in small group sessions. I was astounded by what my students were achieving, how engaged they were in their work and how much I was enjoying my teaching again.

### **And now I see...**

Now I see why REAL Projects are so effective. They are not only 'unshackling' for students but for teachers as well. I have been re-invigorated in my teaching - partly because I can now genuinely see the impact of my teaching in the classroom, partly because I no longer worry about behaviour management or hoop jumping in lessons and partly because teaching has become a rewarding academic challenge. I really feel like a 'professional' in a way I never did previously. I am excited about the start of every new term and I spend my time off visiting museums, reading books and looking out for ways that my students can have an impact in their community. I now see that I could not teach in any other way!

Joe Pardoe teaches Humanities at School 21 in London. For more information about the work he does with his students, visit his digital portfolio at <http://s21humanities.weebly.com/>