PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN THE COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN THE COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

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Many college composition instructors are facing lower levels of student engagement in their classes, and it is not entirely clear why this disengagement is happening or what we can do to stop it. To test a potential solution to this problem, the author built and taught two sections of a second-year college composition course using the structure of Project-Based Learning (PBL), then performed a qualitative summative evaluation of each section using interviews with students and personal notes. This paper concludes that students prefer the PBL classes to traditional English classes for a variety of reasons, including the wider range of choice and control afforded to them by projects and the real-world impact of their creations, but that PBL can make it more challenging for instructors to meet all learning outcomes. While there are many limitations to PBL, it is worth considering as a possible model for composition instructors and an exciting new area of study for composition scholars.

Keywords: college teaching, project-based learning, composition, composition pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

Many college English composition teachers struggle to keep their instruction relevant and engaging for students. In an increasingly STEM-oriented job market, students tend to prioritize the learning of "practical" knowledge and skills, which they do not consider English to be. Imparting the value of reading literature and writing essays can be a challenge for instructors, but the importance of "impractical" critical reading and writing skills cannot be overstated. Because of this struggle, many composition teachers look for alternative methods of instruction, methods that help students see the value of English education without sacrificing the essence of the subject or altering it to fit student needs at the expense of its quality.

This challenge is the catalyst for the following research study, as well as myriad other studies by contemporary composition scholars. Many researchers and theorists (Fleckenstein, 1991; McLeod, 1987; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2008) have identified that students' learning is tied to their affective engagement with material. That is, when students can meaningfully engage with lessons and assignments, they learn more and better. However, as many scholars have found—and as most composition instructors can confirm—student engagement in composition classes, and with school-based composing, is dropping (Davis & Shadle, 2000; Dubson, 2006; Green, 2018; Sharp, Hemmings, Kay, Murphy, & Elliott, 2017). Student disengagement negatively affects both students and instructors and hinders the quality of learning that can take place in the composition classroom.

One potential solution to this (dis)engagement problem is Project-Based Learning. Project-Based Learning (PBL) has had several definitions over time (Bell 2010; Blumenfeld et al 1991; Helle et al 2006; Markham 2003; Solomon 2003), but what each of these definitions has in common is an emphasis on student-led learning, authentic problems/questions, exploration, collaboration, and creativity. PBL and its effects on student learning have been studied for several decades, but while PBL has been adopted in many disciplines at many levels, there is little research into its effectiveness in the first- and second-year college composition classroom. As an English instructor at this level, I was curious if PBL could be used to increase student engagement while still helping students accomplish the Writing Program's Course Learning Outcomes for our second-year writing course. That is, I wanted to see if PBL could allow my students to reach all the same outcomes but be more engaged while doing it. To do so, I settled on three major research questions:

1. To what extent does PBL facilitate the production of high-quality writing (i.e., writing that successfully fulfills the course learning outcomes)?
2. To what extent does PBL enhance or hinder student learning?
3. To what extent does PBL enhance or hinder instruction?

To answer these questions, I performed a qualitative summative evaluation of the two sections of ENG 200—second-year composition at the University of Dayton—that I taught in Fall 2019. Specifically, I employed the PBL approach in my two sections, collected qualitative data from students at multiple points during the semester, and assessed the effectiveness of the class from three angles: success of reaching the learning outcomes, level of student engagement in class, and challenge of building and leading a

PBL class as a college composition instructor. These three angles allowed me to take a holistic look at PBL, to gauge its effectiveness and viability as solution to the rise of students disinterested in traditional English classes.

While a direct comparison between my PBL college composition classes and traditionally structured ones is beyond the scope of this study, my goal is to take the first step and see if a PBL college composition class is viable on its own. As discussed in the conclusion of this paper, the success of my classes can help to lay the groundwork for further research into this area, including comparative studies more directly assessing the differences between the two classroom models.

Similar research into the effectiveness of PBL has been done in high schools and in other departments at the college level, but my work is specific to this university's particular composition course and the course's particular learning outcomes. Because of this, this study's applications are limited to this university. More research into the applicability of PBL in college composition—or other areas of study uncommonly associated with PBL—can build on the successes—and challenges—discussed here.

The Current Pedagogies

Composition studies and the teaching of introductory composition have changed drastically over the past several decades. From a rigid formalist view, to a student-centered expressive one, to the contemporary concept of socially-constructed knowledge, composition studies has undergone wave after wave of change (Berlin, 1994). Recently, scholars have suggested focusing on metacognition, collaborative learning, and teaching writing through content (Beaufort, 2012; Beaufort, 2016; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Fleckenstein, 1991; Green, 2018).

One current approach to composition is that of multimodal writing, where instructors and students use technology and especially visual media to create texts, explore ideas, and collaboratively generate new knowledges (Lutkewitte, 2014). That being said, post-secondary education has been hesitant to adopt this new approach, as summarized here by Kitalong and Miner (2017):

> [We] are, as a profession, still *turning* toward multimodality in composition teaching, research, and administration. We are still calling for assessment and accountability; still trying to ascertain best pedagogical practices; still grappling with how to teach and engage with the many complexities of multimodal composition, including rhetorical, technological, argumentative, and genre-based; and yes, still wondering whether multimodality even belongs in the writing classroom. (p. 1)

All approaches to teaching writing—new and old—have sought to solve specific challenges faced by students and instructors, but many of these challenges still haunt introductory writing courses.

There are several reasons why students disengage with the material and assignments of introductory composition classes. One reason students disengage is because they "associate writing ability with innate talent," and thus believe that if they cannot succeed, it is simply because they lack some internal, "natural" skill (Green, 2018, p. 2). To solve this issue, many scholars (Beaufort, 2016; Taczak, 2015; Tinberg, 2015) have recommended including metacognitive practices in writing classes to help students better understand that writing is a *learnable* skill that requires practice.

One of the most common reasons for disengagement is the redundancy and seemingly arbitrary nature of many (if not most) writing assignments. For many composition classes, the course is dedicated to writing a series of academic papers in which students analyze a series of academic texts. This process may be centered around a specific theme or topic, but the products produced by students are generally very similar. To make matters worse, students also see a disconnect between school writing and "real life," or career-based writing (Dubson, 2006; Downs & Wardle 2007). The similarity of assignments combined with the perceived impracticality of many types of typical composition papers leads many students to become bored in—and ultimately disengage with—composition classes (Davis & Shadle, 2000; Dubson, 2006; Green, 2018; Sharp et al., 2017).

While the current "best practices" of composition pedagogy claim to emphasize content-based (or "real world") writing, collaborative learning, and metacognitive

reflections—all identified as solutions to student disengagement—there still exists a gap between these ideals and actual classroom practice. Because of these widespread frustrations felt by students, is worth identifying real, practical pedagogical practices that can resolve these frustrations, correct misconceptions about what writing is and how it is done, and still help instructors meet required learning outcomes. One such solution is posed here: Project-Based Learning. Project-Based Learning, I argue, could help us to close the gap between theory and practice regarding real-world, collaborative, and metacognitive writing.

Project-Based Learning

Overview

Broadly, Project-Based Learning is a method of teaching by which students solve complex, real-world problems through equally complex and real-world solutions. Even with these accepted essentials of PBL, it is still challenging to pinpoint a clear definition. In their fundamental work in the field of PBL, Blumenfeld et al. (1991) attempt to articulate such a definition, and describe in detail the purpose, function, and properties of this pedagogical method:

> Project-based learning is a comprehensive approach to classroom teaching and learning that is designed to engage students in investigation of authentic problems… Students pursue solutions to nontrivial problems by asking and refining questions, debating ideas, making predictions, designing plans and/or experiments, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, communicating their ideas and findings to others, asking new questions, and creating artifacts (p. 369)

Others (Bell, 2010; Helle et al, 2006; Markham, 2003; Solomon, 2003) have also generated subsequent definitions that highlight similar fundamental values of PBL, such as student-led learning and creative problem-solving of real-world issues. An example of a PBL unit that meets this definition is the history project outlined by Behizadeh (2014). Behizadeh asked her students to identify an issue in their community, and then develop a research-based solution to that problem. In order to do this, the students explored their community to identify problems and worked in small groups to develop their solutions. The classroom as a unit—all the small groups and the teacher—worked together to share ideas and inspiration.

Project-Based Learning is challenging to pin down in part because it is so similar to many other teaching methods, including problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, experiential learning, and others (Larmer, 2013). While there is clear overlap between several of these methods (for instance, project-based, problem-based, and experiential learning all focus on authentic skills, and problem- and inquiry-based learning both focus on teaching students how to ask questions), the difference between Project-Based Learning and *Problem*-Based Learning (frustratingly, both shortened to "PBL") is the most obscured. Generally speaking, *Project*-Based Learning is done over a longer period of time (weeks, or even months, as opposed to days), includes more open-ended inquiry, is more authentic (or based in "real world" scenarios), and asks students to generate artifacts (not just come up with a solution to a problem); whereas *Problem*-Based Learning is shorter, more structured, and has students solve pre-determined problems under ideal, classroom conditions (Larmer, 2013). I chose to focus this research

on *Project*-Based Learning because of its larger scale and more radical difference from traditional college and university writing classrooms.

Research and teaching methods

In recent years, the use of and research into PBL has been sustained and developed further in a variety of fields. As mentioned earlier, this development of PBL research has not stretched into the area of post-secondary composition studies as widely as it has into other fields. However, because the basic structure of PBL is broadly similar across disciplines—as exemplified in the general definition and defining values of PBL mentioned above—it is worthwhile to build a college composition course using the structure of any other PBL class in the Humanities. Thus, much of the research presented below fits underneath the Humanities umbrella.

The structure of the following research study, especially the methodologies for teaching and for data collection, is built on the work of Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) and Blumenfeld et al. (1991), whose studies outline how to instruct in PBL classes, how to assess students, and how to maintain an effective and positive classroom environment. When it comes to assessment, PBL can be challenging for instructors (Blumenfeld et al. 1991), but it can allow students to learn to assess themselves, which is positive for both instructors and students (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011; Pennell & Miles, 2009). In regards to the structure and method of PBL instruction, scholars suggest that instructors need to carefully scaffold their instruction to help "make student understanding more explicit" (Blumenfeld et al. 1991, p. 370), though they concede that this can be challenging even for experienced teachers (Alfonso, 2016; Blumenfeld et al. 1991). Generally speaking, pedagogy scholars organize PBL classes in a 3-phase structure, in which students engage

in a long-term problem (usually a few weeks to two months in length) through three steps: 1) Introduction of the Problem, 2) Student Inquiry and Investigation into the Problem, and 3) The Production of the Project, or other Culminating Event (Alfonso 2017; English & Kitsantas, 2013; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006; Morais, 2018).

Others (Du & Han, 2016; Rasmussen & Conforti, 2011; Stoller, 2006) outline the proper scaffolding for PBL classes. Du & Han (2016), for example, suggest a six-step structure (which I paraphrase here):

> Step 1: Stating the subject and sub-subjects, organizing the groups. Students explore the resources (i.e., texts, data, context for the project) and in order to create a frame for the project they state questions.
>
> Step 2: Groups create projects. Group members make a project plan. They ask questions and choose their roles in the project.
>
> Step 3: Application of the project. Group members are organized and analyze the data (i.e., answers to the questions) and information.
>
> Step 4: Planning of the presentation. The members define the essential points in their presentation and then decide on how to present the project.
>
> Step 5: Making the presentation.
>
> Step 6: Evaluation. Students share the feedback of everyone on their project. Both the students and the teacher share the project(s) with everyone.

Scholars agree that PBL—regardless of the discipline in which it is being used—works best when broken up into many discrete steps. These multi-step class structures also help to highlight the student-centered nature of PBL. While the instructor remains in an

advisory role, students are expected to choose the direction and medium of the project, which in turn helps the students take ownership of their learning.

Scholars also have techniques of determining effectiveness of PBL classes. Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) state that these classes are effective if they are 1) feasible (students can design and perform investigations to answer the question); 2) worthwhile (contain content that aligns with national or district standards and relates to what professionals really do); 3) contextualized (real world, nontrivial, and important); 4) meaningful (interesting and exciting to learners); and 5) ethical (do no harm to individuals, organisms or the environment) (p. 321). If a PBL class accomplishes learning standards *and* the list of items above, it is a success. Additionally, Devici (2018) found success in mixed-method, survey- and interview-based data collection to determine effectiveness. In Devici's research into students' perceptions of collaborative writing in a post-secondary PBL class, the subjects of Devici's (2018) study felt very positively toward the collaboration that came along with PBL. While there were frustrations—such as the clashing of ideas, time management struggles, and "personality clashes"—Devici's study substantiates the value of collecting student opinions to determine a course's effectiveness.

Outcomes of PBL

Scholars have found that PBL helps students develop real-world, 21st century skills. In his results, Newman (2005) found that PBL can help students develop skills in problem-solving, critical reasoning, creativity, interpersonal communication, decision-making, and self-assessment, among others. Others have found that, when implemented in K-12 classrooms, PBL can result in higher test scores and more student engagement

(such as asking more questions in class), and it can even improve students' attitudes (Behizadeh, 2014; Bell, 2010; Helle, Tynjälä and Olkinuora, 2006; Morais, 2018; Solomon, 2003). Specifically, as Morais (2018) found in his experiment with PBL in his history classroom, students even became more empathetic toward others, and they learned to view complex issues from many perspectives. While this proposed study will not examine these exact outcomes of PBL, it is worth noting how big of an impact PBL can have on students' lives and personalities in some cases.

Bell (2010) offers a general understanding of PBL that speaks to the importance of this style of pedagogy:

> Our students develop twenty-first century skills through PBL that will aid them in becoming more productive members of a global society. Many of these skills are not measurable through standardized tests. We must shift our thinking about assessment when teaching twenty-first century skills. With PBL, assessment is authentic.

As Bell states here, PBL both helps students gain real-world skills and provides instructors with a built-in framework for assessment. Because real-world skills cannot be assessed through traditional, often decontextualized, methods, PBL is the perfect candidate for teaching these skills because the real-world context of students' projects necessarily lends itself to authentic assessment. In other words, because students' projects have real audiences with whom students often have direct access, the level of success of their projects can be assessed by the actual impact they have on their audiences, just like real, authentic composing practices.

METHODOLOGY

Before diving headfirst into this project of Project-Based Learning, I was already somewhat familiar with this specific pedagogical approach. PBL was introduced to me by my mother-in-law, a Pre-K classroom aide who works with students with autism, who praised its uses in the local high school. She described how one of the history teachers used a PBL approach in his classroom, and how that class had been a huge success for her (otherwise struggling) daughter and an eye-opening experience for herself. PBL, she claimed, was a way for teachers to reach the students who were left behind by traditional teaching methods.

As a college composition instructor, I was intrigued to see if PBL could also work in my classrooms. I was well aware of the students' negative attitudes toward writing, both on a general, societal level, and through in-class writing and discussion with my students, so I wanted to incorporate real-world issues—issues students would care about—into my classroom. PBL seemed like a perfect candidate for this experiment.

To build my PBL class, I began with the end in mind: What question do I want my students to answer? What problem do I want them to solve? As I read through the literature on other teachers' PBL projects, I settled on a community-centered approach, which also matched my university's commitment to community engagement. For their project, my students would be tasked with identifying an issue in a specific community—whether local to our university, or to the city in which it is located, or to my students' hometowns—and then offering a solution to that issue.

From this point, I needed a theme around which to build my class. I decided on the theme of "cultural fear," and couched discussions of current cultural fears (e.g., immigration, climate change, economic collapse, etc.) in historical examples, most notably the fears of Communism and nuclear war present in the Cold War era of U.S. history. In giving my students examples of fears and the ways fear was taken advantage of through propaganda from history, I was giving them groundwork from which they could more easily identify similar issues happening around us today.

About halfway through the semester, when the historical background had been set and the students had analyzed the rhetorics of fear, I assigned the students a research paper in which they had to identify a current fear, then argue whether that fear was justified or could be backed up with data. This research paper was the basis of their project. After identifying cultural fears present in society, both rational and irrational such as climate change, marriage equality, and vaping, I tasked students together in small groups of two to four with developing multi-modal *solution* to these fears. In other words, it was up to my students to figure out *what to do about that fear*. To solve this problem, the students came up with a variety of projects, which are further described and discussed in the "Results and Discussion" section below. For further information regarding the class, see an abridged version of the class syllabus in Appendix A.

As mentioned above, I had three major research questions:

1. To what extent does PBL facilitate the production of high-quality writing (i.e., writing that successfully fulfills the course learning outcomes)?
2. To what extent does PBL enhance or hinder student learning?
3. To what extent does PBL enhance or hinder instruction?

I attempted to answer these questions using three angles:

(1) First and most importantly, I evaluated the extent to which my students met the learning outcomes through tracking my students' grades and gathering data via interviews. These learning outcomes include the following: reading and writing about primary and secondary texts; engaging in the process approach to writing; producing rhetorically effective writing and well-researched arguments in MLA format; examining one topic from other disciplinary perspectives; and examining a topic in regards to race, class, gender, and/or sexuality ("Writing Program Courses").

(2) Second, I gathered information about the students' experiences in the class through individual and group interviews and keeping track of student engagement through my own written reflections.

(3) Third, I reflected on my own experience with building and leading the class because even if PBL is found to be very effective for students, it is worth noting to what extent this style of instruction is a challenge for composition instructors. In other words, even if students reach the learning outcomes and stay consistently engaged, PBL would not be considered viable if the instructors were unable to feasibly manage that style of instruction.

I began by obtaining IRB approval, then recruited my participants. Students were self-selected and volunteered based on a brief verbal overview of my research that I gave during the fourth week of classes. I was able to recruit five students from each of my two second-year composition sections for a total of ten participants. These participants were all sophomores, and six were male and four were female—a ratio consistent with the norm in my classes. The spread of majors was also relatively consistent with the rest of

my classes with their majors being engineering (4), business (2), communication (2), music (1), and undecided (1). All ten of the students were present for the individual interviews, but the focus group interviews, divided by class, had only four out of five and three out of five being present, respectively.

My personal notes, taken during and just after class, consisted of reflections jotted down in my personal lesson-planning notebook and on a reflection template I created for this project (Appendix B). After collecting all of my reflection notes at the end of the semester, I analyzed them, specifically looking for patterns of positive and negative language and language associated with ease or difficulty of particular lessons or activities. The results of this analysis are discussed in more detail below.

For the interviews, I enlisted the help of other professors in the English department to interview my students in one-on-one and focus group settings. Both interviews were semi-structured and recorded by the professors; interview questions can be found in Appendix C. The one-on-one interviews were performed in the midst of the students' projects, in an attempt to identify challenges and successes in project creation as they happened. The focus group interviews were divided by class section, so the students would be familiar with each other and thus more likely to share candidly. These sessions were conducted at the end of the semester with the goal of reflecting on the project from a distance. For the purposes of this study, most of my data and analysis came from the focus group interviews because the data provided by the two types of interviews had few differences, and the focus group interviews had more in-depth answers and had the luxury of hindsight, so students could reflect on their projects as a whole. The individual

interviews did contain quality information, but that information is also available in more depth in the focus group interviews, so I chose to concentrate on those.

The interview questions asked students to reflect on the process of working on their projects. The goal of these questions was to gauge the students' levels of engagement and interest and to explore their interpretations of their learning experiences in the class. Additionally, the questions served as a litmus test for the extent to which my class actually followed the definition and parameters of PBL. During their focus group interviews, the students were given the interview questions and a copy of the definition of PBL: "Project-Based Learning is a method of teaching by which students solve complex, real-world problems through equally complex and real-world solutions." They were asked to rate how well the project helped them meet the course learning outcomes (CLOs) and how well their projects matched the definition of PBL. After transcribing the interviews, I coded them according to the patterns and trends I saw while reading them. I then divided the transcriptions into five broad categories (Choice, Ownership, Authenticity, Education, and Skills), which are then broken down further in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Overview of Coding Schema

Choice	Positive (Ch.P) Negative (Ch.N)
Ownership	Content Knowledge Learned (Own.CK) Permanence of Product (Own.P) Self-Expression (Own.SE)
Authenticity	Real World Implications (Au.RW) Social Connections (Au.Soc)
Education	Educational Context of Project (Ed.Con) Learning Outcomes (Ed.CLO) Problem-Solving (Ed.PS)
Technical Skills	Genre or Technological Skills (Tech.G) Writing/Rhetoric Skills (Tech.W)

Choice represents students' statements about their freedom to select the topic, genre, and mode of their projects. This category was subdivided into "Positive" statements—those that praise the freedom of choice—and "Negative" ones—those that describe the freedom as being overwhelming or challenging.

Ownership represents statements concerning student control over and pride in their projects. "Content Knowledge" refers to examples when students discussed taking ownership of their learning and gaining content area knowledge in order to complete their projects (for example, when a student researched third-party political parties for their voting campaign). "Permanence of Product" indicates when students discussed the substance of the project they were creating, such as the tangibility of posters or the perpetuity of YouTube videos. "Self-Expression" includes statements in which students described their projects as extensions of themselves or outlets for their creativity.

Authenticity represents statements about the "real world" outcomes of their projects, where "Real World Implications" covers statements about the "realness" of their project—usually that it was a semi-public, tangible thing not limited to the classroom like traditional composition papers. "Social Connections" covers statements about the impact of their projects on other people, including their other group-mates.

Education represents statements that relate the project to their formal learning. "Educational Context" indicates that students discussed the setting in which they were working, usually comparing traditional English assignments to assignments in other disciplines. "Learning Outcomes" indicates students' statements about how the project and the class at a whole met or failed to meet the learning outcomes (which was a question during the second round of interviews). "Problem-Solving" indicates statements in which students talk about the project in terms of problem-solving.

Technical Skills represents students' statements about the skills they used and learned during the process of making the project. These include "Writing/Rhetoric Skills," which cover the composition-related learning done during the project, and "Genre or Technical Skills" which cover all other skills, including learning certain genre or modal conventions (such as the parts of a strong PSA video) and technological skills (such as how to film and edit a PSA video).

Using these codes, I was able to organize the data into a usable collection, through which I could finally determine the extent to which these classes helped students meet the learning outcomes, become engaged while doing so, and allowed for a positive instructor experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(All students' names have been changed to protect their identities.)

To begin, it is important to give some context regarding the actual projects my students created during this study. As mentioned above, these projects took place during the second half of the semester (weeks 9 through 15), and were built on a research paper that acted as scaffolding for the kind of inquiry, problem-identification, and problem-solving that the students would be asked to do during their projects. Though there were several groups who wanted to tackle the problems of climate change and pollution (including participants Jake, Daniel, Ellen, and Desmond), there was some variety in focus across the rest of them, including a catfishing-awareness short film (Austin and Emma) and a suicide prevention social media campaign (Sidney).

One group—including participants Henry—focused on the anxiety felt by politically-minded young people regarding the apathy of many young people who do not vote. They created a social media campaign with the goal of spreading information about how to vote in the next presidential election. They also put up posters and even set up laptops in public areas on campus for other students to take online quizzes to become more familiar with the candidates and discover which candidate best matched their views.

Another group—made up of Christine and Sarah, each of whom participated here—made a music video using the Vampire Weekend song "Hold Me Now" to showcase the importance of marriage equality. This message was particularly important because, as they noted during the creation of their project, many parents of students at our Catholic university may not support LGBTQ+ people. Thus, these students made

incredible emotional appeals, including an actual home-video of one of the group members when she was a small child that would be sure to pull at the heartstrings of parents. The students shared the emotionally evocative video on Facebook, the social media of choice of their parents' generation (so I was told).

After completing their projects, students were assigned a reflection paper, in which they were tasked with considering the process of creating their projects, highlighting what they learned, what they struggled with, improvements that could be made to the assignment, or things they would do differently if doing this project again. While data from these papers is not part of this research study, the reflection paper both its questions and its results mimic the information in the focus groups in which the volunteer students participated.

As mentioned earlier, these interviews were incredibly valuable, and after codifying the transcripts, clear patterns emerged. The coded categories—listed in the above section—revealed several interesting things that will be discussed in more detail below. For specific, quantified data, such as what percent of the total each category makes up, see the Table 2, 3, and 4 in Appendix D.

For the following section, I have broken down the code schemas. Each category and its subcategories offer insights into the student experience of PBL, as well as great feedback regarding challenges students faced and improvements that could be made.

Choice

As per the many definitions of Project-Based Learning, an important factor of PBL is student choice. Teachers should act as facilitators and guides rather than the proverbial sage on the stage for projects. In my class, I gave students a few limiting

factors: they had to find a problem that caused fear in people within a specific community (or, if it affected a larger population, focus their solution on a specific community) and create a multi-modal, public (or semi-public, depending on their audience) solution. Outside of these limitations, students were free to choose what problem they wanted to solve, what community they wanted to focus on, and what medium to use to create their project.

Positive

During the interviews, the students spoke both positively and negatively about the freedom and choice given to them during their projects. Most of the Choice comments, however, do indicate that students appreciated the freedoms afforded to them by PBL. As Sarah said, "Having the freedom to be able to pick our topic and have the freedom of the way we want to use it, whether we use it through a video, or we make a poster, or we make a campaign about it, it is more engaging and more interesting…than writing a paper." Positive reactions, like this one, often saw the projects being compared to traditional papers commonly done in English classes. While it is somewhat disheartening for composition teachers to learn that "different than English" automatically equals "good" for students, this conclusion is not entirely surprising. Because they tend to feel frustrated with the constraints associated with traditional English papers, the freedoms of PBL projects were refreshing for my students.

Negative

As far as negative comments, some students stated that the amount of freedom afforded to them was overwhelming and challenging. There were also several comments in which students expressed frustration over having to choose their medium (though they

did overwhelmingly like the freedom to choose their *topic*). This issue is not one my class is alone in experiencing; as Blumenfeld et al (1991) state, "questions abound regarding optimal proportioning of choice and control between teachers and students so that novices are not overwhelmed by the demands of doing projects" (377). Students' negative attitudes should sometimes be taken with a grain of salt and do not always mean that an activity should be avoided. After all, challenges can be frustrating for students, but they can ultimately be good for them. This may suggest that instructors need to rethink how assignments are scaffolded and how much freedom is afforded students, which I explore further in the conclusion of this study.

Ownership

When educators emphasize the importance of students "owning their learning," they are talking about students' responsibility for their work, as well as the care and energy they put into that work (English & Kitsantas, 2013). When students own their learning, they ask their own questions, find their own answers, and succeed and, often more importantly, fail at their own challenges. Teachers act as guides throughout the process, but students are really the ones in charge, which leads students to care more about their work, and thus put more effort into it. A sense of ownership can take many forms, several of which were present in my students during and after their projects. The three most prevalent kinds of ownership are seen in students (1) independently seeking out content knowledge related to their project topic; (2) voicing pride in the tangible substance and permanence of their projects; and (3) using their projects as a form of self-expression to put a piece of themselves into the world.

Content Knowledge

While I did ask students to include some kind of scholarly research in their projects to back up any claims or arguments they were making (such as statistics on ocean pollution, for example), many students did extra research simply to learn more about the subject of their project. The best example of this is one of the students from the political activism group mentioned above. Henry, an international students from China, spoke at length about the amount of extra, outside information he gathered just to learn about the United States' politics and policies: "I learned a lot about immigration…because this topic is what I like, so I love to do research about this." He continues this reflection in the focus group interviews: "[I] did so much research [for] papers…but this project is really like…we go out and we figure out [information on] our own." Clearly, when students are given freedom to own their learning, *most will*. When they have the freedom to study something they are interested in, *most will*.

Permanence

Many of the students also liked the permanence that came with creating products more public than essays seen only by their professor. "Seeing it all come together," as many students put it—seeing their ownership have a tangible outcome—was also a positive effect of the permanence of projects. When students spend a significant amount of time and energy on creating something, being able to share that thing with a wide—even global, in some cases—audience gives them a sense of satisfaction and pride that does not and *cannot* come from traditional papers. This sense of pride helps students to emotionally engage with the material, which, as may researchers (Fleckenstein, 1991;

McLeod, 1987; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2008) have discussed, helps them learn more effectively.

This ownership-productivity feedback loop is not omnidirectional, however. When students know that their projects will be seen by a large audience, the stakes are suddenly raised. It is one thing to write a poor paper that only your professor knows about; the situation is entirely different when you create a poorly-thought-out advertisement or hastily-edited PSA that is available for viewing by everyone on YouTube. Thus, students are more likely to put more effort and care into the things they are creating, resulting in higher-quality items, which they then care about even more. This idea is summed up nicely by Christine, who stated that "it was just awesome…knowing how much effort we put into it. It's just rewarding to see that your effort turned out good (sic) and you've made a good project."

Self-Expression

Another element that affects this feedback loop is the self-expression that many students remarked on. As Sarah said of her marriage equality music video, "When you create a video, it's more personal. So, you, like, work harder…and you relate to it more. So, you care about it more also." Because the students had the freedom to choose their topics, they were free to choose subjects they were passionate about. A substantial number of the students mentioned that they felt that they were putting a piece of themselves into their projects, in part, because their projects were motivated by personal experiences. Sarah and Christine, for example, who created a music video in support of same-sex marriage, said that their project was inspired by their own friends who had had trouble coming out to their parents.

Getting students to "own their learning" is well-accepted praxis, and by looking at all my students' comments about independently seeking outside information, being proud of their hard work, and using their projects to express themselves it is clear that they felt a rich sense of ownership of their work.

Authenticity

There were two subcategories within the "Authenticity" code: Real World Implications and Social Connections. For the purposes of this study, "authenticity" refers to a project's impact on people other than the students who created it, or the *students'* interactions with other people (including each other) that are facilitated by the project. For example, a group's interrelations fit under the "Social Connections" sub-category, and the persuasiveness of a group's PSA fits under the "Real World Implications" sub-category.

Real World Implications

Regarding the real-world implications of their projects, the students talked about how their projects fit in real-world genres that real people actually make in real life. In talking about his project on climate change, Daniel stated that our class' projects definitely fit within the definition of PBL given to them because "I really think people do them [make PSAs]…it's not just a project thing." In other words, creating a project gave students experience in making a product that they could possibly employ entering the job market, something that they often feel English classes do *not* prepare them for.

Additionally, students expressed that they often chose topics that they felt the public was not knowledgeable enough about, such as the epidemic of catfishing (someone lying about their identity online): "[Catfishing] is a very real world problem,

and it's kind of a complex situation…[Even] Mrs. Burke said she didn't really know what catfishing was, so it's…a real issue that needs relevance and, like, people to know about it," said Austin. The students felt that their passions about their projects were fueled by the project's relevance to people, which shows that the students genuinely cared about their audiences. As touched on previously, this kind of emotional and real-world connection to their work helps students to learn more effectively. This direct connection with their audiences also helps students to see the need for rhetorically minded decisions in their writing, thus increasing their understanding of and skill in rhetorically effective composition.

Social Connections

Similarly, students often talked about the social impact of their projects in terms of authentic audiences. They mentioned that convincing real people not just classmates or their professor was a positive aspect of their projects. For example, Christine shared in her individual interview that "[a] research [paper] feels like it stays in the classroom, in a way, but social-wise, [this topic is] something that has affected people that are close to me, so it feels more interactive than writing a paper." Clearly, the students are passionate about spreading information and arguments they care about to audiences that are more authentic than a single professor or peer-review group. This kind of passion catalyzes students' engagement with the material which in turn fuels a deeper understanding of the content.

The social aspect of their projects was not entirely positive, however. A common complaint shared by the students was that working in groups was challenging. This issue, to which nearly 15% of all substantive comments were dedicated (Appendix D), was

polarizing, with some students stating that they loved their groups while others blamed their group members for their poor project grades. For example, Henry raved about his group: "My team is doing a really good job. They are great people. … Everybody just carries each other to move forward. … It's the best group I've ever been in." Jake, on the other hand, said that his groups' climate change project was "not necessarily rewarding" because his group "half-assed everything…and then [they] kind of had a half-ass project in the end." However, it is worth noting that Jake had earlier mentioned that the project helped him "learn a lot about communication skills and collaborating with other people." In either case, groupwork is and has been polarizing, and for my class PBL was not a cure-all for the pitfalls of working with other. When the stakes are raised, it seems, individuals can fall victim to a lackluster group. As I will expand on in the conclusion, there are many challenges related to PBL, including groupwork, and solutions to such problems are a challenge of their own, and can often only be applied on a case-by-case basis.

Education

The category of "Education" is broken up into three sub-categories: Context, Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) and Problem-Solving. Each of these sub-categories revolves around students' remarks on the ways they learn as well as the outcomes of their learning. These are worth investigating because students' comments can offer insight into possible ways to shape our classrooms to best meet our students' needs.

Context

The Context sub-category includes comments about the settings in which the students' educational work takes place. The most common among these comments was a

comparison between "regular English classes" and our PBL class, often painting the nontraditional classroom in a more positive light. For students, research papers are the bogeyman of English classes. As Austin noted, research papers are "straightforward," assignments that "you can kind of dilly-dally around" on; whereas, projects are much more open-ended and "it's pretty obvious if you know what you're doing or not." Perhaps not surprisingly students tend not to like research papers, and they also do not like the mindset that comes with them: A research paper is a very serious paper with very serious guidelines, that is written in a very specific way, then graded by one specific person and returned to the student. Students resent this artificiality, which is embodied synecdochally in research papers.

I am not suggesting that the students in my class are correct in their position that being different than "regular English classes" is the specific criterion that made the PBL class more enjoyable, or that college composition teachers should avoid research papers just because students do not like them. I *am* suggesting that the students in my class like authentic work—work that has a real, public audience, mimics real-world processes, and creates a tangible product—and that it is possible that kind of work is missing from traditional classrooms, which, on the surface, appears to students as a failing of research papers, if not traditional English classrooms as a whole.

As a final, smaller point for the "Context" sub-category, another claim Sarah made was that creating projects was more inclusive since it allowed for more types of learning and the many different knowledges students bring to class. Specifically, she argued that doing a visual project worked better for her because she often "[had] a hard time getting exactly what [she wanted] …to express in words." English studies has been

moving steadily toward a more multimodal approach to writing, so having assignments that work *with* students' learning styles rather than *against* them is a possibility now more than ever, and creating projects is just one way to meet students where they are.

Course Learning Outcomes

It is important to first acknowledge that the numerical results (Appendix D) for the Course Learning Outcomes sub-category are inflated. This inflation occurred because students' remarks about the CLOs were prompted by a question about the extent to which they felt the class met those outcomes (Appendix C). This inflation was not intentional, and I do not draw any conclusions from the raw data alone, but it is important to be transparent about the context of this data. Disclaimer aside, the "CLO" comments supported my position that the class successfully met the course's learning outcomes. Students, when posed the question about this subject, stated that they felt the project helped them to achieve many of the CLOs. Austin said that "four of these [six outcomes] fit well with the project or can be put into the project," later continuing, "some of [the outcomes] were addressed in [another student's] project that weren't addressed in [this student's project]," suggesting that the kind of project a student chooses is part of what determines the specific learning outcomes that student will reach.

During the interviews, the students also mentioned specific CLOs that they felt they were able to meet through their projects. Of these, the most common were CLO 3 (Produce rhetorically effective college-level expository prose), CLO 5 (Examine one topic from at least three disciplinary perspectives, two of which are in the Humanities Commons), and CLO 6 (Examine one topic with attention to difference such as race, class, gender, and/or sexuality).

Students said that the project helped them complete CLO 3 because while they had done similar projects in high school, as Sarah put it, "[it] was obvious [this project] had to be much better," to be fit for a college class. To complete CLO 3 she also "used different rhetorical approaches to kind of attack the issue [and we] talk[ed] about how to persuade people and what would get someone's attention." For CLOs 5 and 6, which concern different disciplines and awareness of social differences, many the students said that "they fit with the class" because the projects fit in genres outside of English and were aimed toward specific communities, which were often made up of minority populations. The group that made the marriage equality music video had a primary audience of the straight, cis-gender (often white) parents of our university's students and a secondary audience of the university's LGBTQ+ community with whom my students allied. Austin, about his group's project on catfishing, said that "catfishing is something that I feel applies right to that [CLO]. People that are kind of, like, vulnerable, I guess, are the ones that are susceptible to it [catfishing]." Together, these students' examples show that they not only produced rhetorically effective, cross-curricular, college-level prose aimed at populations outside of themselves, but, metacognitively, were also aware of their learning.

It is worth noting that some students suggested that the freedom afforded by PBL actually came at the *expense* of meeting the Course Learning Outcomes though, it should be noted, they still supported the positives of the projects. As Jake said, "it's hard to leave a project that open and also expect it to meet all of those [outcomes]"; Sarah echoed a similar sentiment, stating that "The freedom was [part of] why it [the project] was so much fun, but…because of the freedom, you're not going to be able to do all of the

CLOs." From the students' perspectives, only some of the CLOs were met through the project specifically; they were all met, however, over the course of the entire semester. Trying to meet all of the CLOs during the project itself, it seems, would be a fruitless endeavor that would ultimately come at the cost of many of the freedoms that make the project engaging in the first place. To quote Blumenfeld et al, "Balancing students' need for choice…with the need to have students address and learn content defined by curricular mandates and requirements poses a significant dilemma" (377).

Problem-Solving

This subcategory covers comments students made in which they discuss PBL in terms of unsurprisingly problem-solving. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Problem-Based Learning is a pedagogical practice similar to Project-Based Learning, except that the former is smaller in scale and centers more around discrete problem-solving exercises instead of larger product-producing projects. Because of this, it was surprising to have students entirely unprompted bring up problem-solving when discussing Project-Based Learning. Even though Project-Based Learning does incorporate problem-solving, the problem-solving is not as readily apparent as it is in Problem-Based Learning. The problem-solving in Project-Based Learning is integrated? into the creation of the products, not laid bare as individual, decontextualized exercises.

When discussing problem-solving, many students spoke positively, stating that the project "helped their critical thinking," and that they liked "think[ing] on [their] feet" and being "able to come up with a complex problem and then find solutions [for] it." Henry even compared the work in our composition class to the work he did in a calculus class because the project was "complex, [with] difficult problems…[that required] more

difficult method[s] to solve [them].” As mentioned above, these comments while positive and encouraging were surprising, since the interviewer had not brought up problem-solving at all. The students’ comments could have possibly stemmed from the ambiguous nature of PBL (Project-Based Learning does sound similar to Problem-Based Learning, after all). It is also possible that PBL simply exposed the problem-solving possibilities inherent in questions of communication, which composition teachers often try to incorporate into their writing assignments, but that students are often unable to see. In other words, though many writing assignments include elements of problem-solving, this is rarely evident to students; however, combining these writing assignments with PBL—a practice with problem-solving built-in—could reveal the problem-solving inherent in both, allowing students to finally see behind the curtain and get a better view of their own learning as it happens.

Technical Skills

One of the positive parts of PBL that its proponents emphasize is the cross-curricular quality of projects. When making projects, students do not just learn the content knowledge associated with the class, but they also learn things *outside* that discipline. PBL, its proponents argue, is like a miniature liberal arts education. The “Technical Skills” category includes students’ comments about the many kinds of learning they did in order to complete their projects. I divided this category into two sub-categories of skillsets: Writing/Rhetorical Skills—which include skills related to writing, such as process, rhetorical awareness, and revision—and Genre/Technological Skills—which include everything else, all of the *other* learning students had to do to complete the projects.

Genre/Technological Skills

Because of the types of projects my students chose—mostly video-based ones—many of the genre/technological skills they had to learn were related to video editing. This led to many comments about the challenges of editing videos, including the time constraints of filming and editing and the always-looming specter of computer crashes. During the planning phase of project creation, I had had a colleague who is skilled in video-editing come in a give a guest lecture on programs and techniques the students could use when making their projects. However, the students still struggled with these elements; it does not come as a surprise, but one cannot learn how to become a video editor in the span of a couple of weeks.

Other groups made flyers and social media campaigns as part of their projects. Henry, one member of the voting project group, said that he found it challenging to "figure out, like, the way [to] use social medias…[and] flyers to, you know, inform people." Though it came with a learning curve, the students seemed to successfully learn to write in new modes and in new genres than they had written before.

Writing/Rhetorical Skills

When talking about writing skills, students rarely explicitly stated that what they were doing was actually considered writing. For example, Sarah, when talking about the learning outcomes their group did or did not meet, said that she felt "the only [outcome] that I felt like [the project] didn't really go into were [*sic*] um, the process approach to writing"; however, during both her individual interview and the focus group interview, she had spoken at length about storyboarding, filming, editing, re-shooting, and re-editing the video, all of which mimic the recursive stages of the writing process. Jake even went

so far as to say that he enjoyed the project because it "[got] away from, like, the writing part." Students also failed to explicitly connect their projects to the specific rhetorical skills that they were using. Many students spoke about the ways they made their projects persuasive to their chosen audiences. These strategies suggest that students—such as Emma, quoted here—were engaged in rhetorical awareness and audience-focused thinking without being aware of it:

> When we started our project, our…audience was going to be [our university's] students or kids our age. So we wanted to make something that wasn't going to just be, like, boring as most things can be, uh, to kids our age… We wanted to start out [the video] …a little bit lighter, like not necessarily humorous, but not so serious.

Though I made a concerted attempt throughout the semester to emphasize that not all composing is what has traditionally been considered "writing," it is evident that many of my students maintained traditional ideas of composing as producing alphabetic texts.

It was heartening to hear about the many multi-modal skills that my students had learned of their own accord during the course of creating their projects. However, it was somewhat disheartening to hear my students give examples of the writing skills they were using to complete their projects and then immediately say that they felt that the project did not include writing, and this misunderstanding will be further explored in the Conclusion section below.

Instructor Experience

My experience in planning and implementing this course was as varied as my students' responses to it. I have already touched briefly on my experience of planning this

course (see Methodology section), so in expanding on it here, I want to discuss the differences between building this class and other, more traditional composition classes I've taught. Creating assignments, scaffolding, and lesson planning are normal parts of the teaching process—and can even be enjoyable—but I want to be sure to emphasize how challenging this specific process was. Because of the nature of PBL, it is necessary to make sure that all assignments and activities are scaffolded very carefully. Connections between assignments and the real world, real-world applications for skills, and students' control over the entire process *must* be transparent to the students throughout. I had to be meticulous and thorough that there were no oversights or missteps in how the course was put together. It is possible that the weight of planning the course did not come from the implementation of PBL, but instead came from the reality of this research study. I always devote time, energy, and care to my teaching, no matter the topic or method of instruction. However, knowing that that teaching—along with my students and their work—would be analyzed in depth for months raised the stakes and contributed to the pressure I felt to make this class perfect. Additionally, as a graduate teaching assistant, I felt pressured to make sure my class was just as rigorous as those taught by "real professors." This pressure—whether a by-product of PBL or self-inflicted—caused stress, but a strong departmental support system helped me to stay on track.

As far as specific differences between this class and others I have taught, most of the differences came in the planning and building stages. To build this class, I started at the end, as is suggested by many scholars on PBL (and backwards design in pedagogy in general) (Krajcik and Blumenfeld, 2006), and came up with a driving question that would guide both my creation of the course as well as my students' processes of making their

projects: How is fear used to shape people's views and behaviors? I knew that I wanted my students to create some kind of publicly accessible product that would combat an anxiety-inducing issue present in their community. While backwards design is generally well-accepted practice, PBL classes take this a step further by distilling the entire project down into a single, driving question.

From this driving question, I started to build my course. Because our university's second-year composition classes are themed, I chose a theme that would allow me to discuss fear on a social scale and the way it was manipulated—the Cold War period of U.S. history. Driving question, project goal, and theme in tow, I began to create and scaffold the rest of the assignments that would meet the department's guidelines (such as the Course Learning Outcomes and the suggested semester page-count of 18 pages of writing from each student). An abridged version of my syllabus that includes general course information and the order of assignments is available in Appendix A.

There were few differences in the day-to-day instruction between my PBL class and past (and current) classes I have taught. The biggest difference was that there was more student choice in all parts of the class. I often make writing assignments with student autonomy and choice in mind, but in teaching this class, I emphasized them even more. Students were constantly a part of building the class as it went on. The strongest example of this is the project itself. When I assigned the project (Appendix E), I allowed students to design their own rubrics for it. To do so, I modeled my own rubrics that I used when grading their papers. I talked through my design process, why I chose to evaluate certain criteria and not others, why criteria are weighted differently, etc. I shared other

teachers' rubrics and other assessment material with the students, as well, to give them a breadth of styles they could use to make their own.

Having students make their own evaluation material was an experiment that I hoped would help them own their learning and feel that their projects were being evaluated as fairly as possible, but this method seemed to fall flat with my students. As I mention in my reflection notes from that class session: "Rubric-making—negative; students are quiet, seem irritated." This was frustrating, but it also emphasized that, even though I spent endless mental and emotional energy making sure my lessons were *perfect*, teaching rarely goes to plan. When the students are given as much freedom as they are with PBL, classes can end up going in directions that I could never have planned, especially considering my relatively limited teaching experience.

Teaching a course using Project-Based Learning was a challenge. PBL required that I front-load my work and it added an extra layer of complication to planning and scaffolding. Especially in an English class, where I had to make room for so many papers, it seemed impossible to add an even bigger assignment where the students might not even make a "paper." Some of my students were frustrated with the lack of rigid guidelines that they were used to. Just like any other method of teaching, there were lessons that went poorly, activities that did not land with students, and other missteps, but in a PBL class those missteps felt even bigger and harder to recover from.

Teaching a course using Project-Based Learning was also incredibly rewarding. Because of all the energy I put into scaffolding, all the smaller parts of the course came together to help students create successful projects. The learning outcomes and departmental guidelines—even for English classes—were surprisingly easy to

incorporate into projects, since they had to be planned out, done in parts, and revised, just like papers. Once they got comfortable with me, their classmates, and themselves, my students were able to confidently take chances, try new things, fail, and recover. Because I shared so much power, choice, and agency with my students, any time things did not go to plan, the students and I worked together to get things back on track.

Things were not perfect, by any means, and the challenge was often frustrating, but incorporating PBL into my composition class was far from impossible, and the benefits greatly outweighed the problems. Getting to see all of my students' projects at the end of the semester made my many long hours of planning all worthwhile.

CONCLUSION

While the limitation of focusing on a small interview sample precludes far-reaching curriculum changes, the answers to my research questions provide some tentative groundwork for further research into PBL usage in college composition classes.

The first of my research questions concerns how PBL facilitates the production of high-quality writing by students. Through this study, I found that PBL allowed my students to create multi-modal products that showcased a level of creativity and critical thinking that is often not present in traditional papers. Students showed rhetorical awareness, engaged in a process-approach to project creation, and made authentic products that they were extremely proud of. My students' high-quality writing is a result of their hard work throughout the semester, but I also believe that this hard work was catalyzed by their projects.

The second research question concerns students' engagement with the material. Students also appreciated the amount of creativity that they were afforded, and because they were given freedom and agency, both engagement and quality of learning increased. Based on their comments during the interviews, it is clear that my students were very engaged with the material. While there were some missteps, such as the pitfalls of group-work, students generally had a very positive experience with the project.

The last of my research questions, which concerns instructor experience, was the most challenging to answer. My experience is not universal, so any extrapolations from my data are extremely limited. That being said, while creating and leading this class was challenging, it was not so challenging as to be impossible, especially for more

experienced teachers. Of the many things I learned—about teaching, about my students, about myself—during this study, the most helpful was that students generally do rise to the challenges set before them. When students have choice, they can choose to study things they care about, which allows them to own their learning.

However, not all conclusions are so uplifting; there were certainly student responses that were surprising, if not outright disheartening. As mentioned earlier in this paper, students were often unable to identify what does and does not "count" as writing. They struggled to see that editing a short film is just as much a form of revision as restructuring a research paper, or that carefully choosing visual gags that your audience will find funny shows just as much rhetorical awareness as precise word choice in a persuasive essay.

One inference that can be drawn from this is that when revision, rhetoric, and other writing skills are taught to students as decontextualized, discrete steps, it nearly impossible for students to recognize the similarities across composing practices when they are doing those same things in settings outside of English classes, academic essays, or even traditional writing modes. It is unclear whether this is the fault of the teacher or of the students—after all, I attempted to make it clear that all writing is rhetorical and that the creation of videos is writing, but many of my students still failed to make the connection. I do believe, however, that more experienced teachers would be more successful than I was at making the writing process transparent, especially when using PBL, since it helps make these connections even more clear.

This missed connection did not prevent my students from making successful projects; after all, in PBL, all of the work is *necessarily* contextualized. Students are

doing all of their work in a setting outside of the classroom because they are tackling a public issue for a public audience. When work is decontextualized, however—as much academic, classroom writing is—students may not see why knowing how to revise, how to persuade, and how to *write* are important skills. As college composition teachers, we need to emphasize metacognition. We need to make sure that our students' learning is transparent to them, not only so they can see the extra-curricular applications of their educations, but also so they can become more aware of who they are as learners.

Another interesting trend in my students' comments was that the projects were so engaging because they were not papers. While it is also true that many students may also just lament the actual act of writing—writing is not easy, after all—it is still important to listen to them when they consistently decry research papers. Academic essays are the backbone of most English classes, especially composition classes, so it is hard for students—and teachers—to escape this ever-present genre. This issue ties into the previous one; students do not see the importance of writing essays. This, I believe, is due to the fact that essays rarely have authentic audiences and purposes. In many cases, composition instructors come up with a writing assignment that fulfills a learning outcome, they assign that paper to their students, the students write the paper for their instructor (the only one who will be reading it), and the instructor grades it. It is a closed system.

PBL is different. My students' projects were created in response to an authentic problem, as identified and chosen by the students. My students also had an authentic audience. Even though I was still grading their projects, the students knew that their work would be shown off to a semi-public audience of their peers—the community most of

them chose as their main audience for rhetorical purposes—at the end of the semester. I believe that these are the differences between papers and PBL projects that caused students to say they prefer the latter: Even though they are doing similar amounts of work in both cases (if not *more* work for projects), because students get a choice—a voice—and because they are making their projects for authentic audience in response to an authentic problem, students like projects more than papers, and when students actively enjoy their work, they learn more effectively and make better products.

This is not to say that papers are useless, or that multi-modal writing is the only writing students should do. To the contrary, I think it would be detrimental to students if PBL replaced all traditional writing instruction. The main inference I am drawing from my students' comments is that writing assignments need to be more responsive to student needs and twenty-first century skills. That is, we can still assign essays, but we just need to be sure that those essays are not decontextualized from the real world.

Based on the entirety of my students' comments, it is clear that, for my classroom at least, PBL alone is not the answer. The challenge of too much choice, the variable nature of group-work, and the instructor strain all suggest that this method is not a sure-fire solution to many of the issues plaguing introductory college composition courses. Going forward, I plan to implement a mix of both PBL and traditional methods in my composition classes. As one student of mine suggested.

> I think that one thing that should be considered is that, well, this project-based learning, it goes really well in addition to a traditional classroom like what we did for the rest of the semester. So, I feel…I think that you should also take that into consideration, that they go really well together.

For college composition teachers who are considering implementing a PBL approach in their classrooms, there are a few recommendations based on my experience: While students tend to appreciate the freedom to choose their topics, many of my students felt frustrated at having to choose the medium for their project. Consider giving them a discrete list of choices to limit their options or nudging them by offering suggestions. Giving students freedom also comes at the cost of covering the learning outcomes. Unless you have a list of pre-approved topics tied to each of the learning outcomes, students' choices will inevitably cover different ground. Whether you choose to take more control to be more confident that you will meet all learning outcomes, or whether you give students more freedom and accept that you may have to include other assignments so all students can reach all learning outcomes, it is necessary to keep it in mind when planning your PBL unit.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

As mentioned above, there are many limitations of this study. From my small, self-selected sample size, made even smaller by the inconsistent attendance at the focus-group interviews, to the aforementioned skewing of answers to the learning outcome interview question, there are many improvements on this study's methodology that could be made.

Further research into the viability of PBL in the college writing composition classroom is still necessary; the most glaring gap highlighted by my study is the lack of comparative studies. More research studies comparing PBL and traditionally structured college composition classes would be invaluable to this growing field of study. While there are college composition instructors who are using similar approaches in their

college composition classes already, more observations, data, and analysis would help scholars to better understand the benefits and limitations of Project-Based Learning in different kinds of learning environments. This method of instruction and course design is wide-open for experimentation, creativity, and investigation by teachers at all levels and in all subjects. It is extremely exciting to consider the ways it could help to improve English education.

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APPENDIX A

English 200 Fall 2019 Syllabus

ENG 200 (30): Fear and Loathing in the Cold War

Section 05: T,Th 2:00-3:15 p.m.

Instructor—Zoe Burke

Course Description

ENG 200 is a writing seminar designed to develop students' proficiency in academic inquiry, research, argumentation, and written communication. Each section of ENG 200 is organized around a theme, so that we have a topic about which we can inquire, research, form arguments, and write essays. The theme of our section is the Cold War—the period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union that occurred between the end of World War II and the late 1980s. We will spend the semester learning about the historical context of the Cold War, focusing on how Americans' fears were highlighted in the media during the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, we will see what people *today* can learn from the Cold War's culture of fear.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. Write about primary and secondary texts on the course theme in a manner that reflects the ability to read critically
2. Engage in a process approach to writing college-level prose
3. Produce rhetorically effective college-level expository prose
4. Produce well researched academic arguments and appeals that are documented in accordance with the MLA style manual
5. Examine one topic from at least three disciplinary perspectives, two of which are in the Humanities Commons
6. Examine one topic with attention to difference such as race, class, gender, and/or sexuality

Assignment Information

When each paper is introduced in class, I will provide a more detailed assignment sheet and rubric. This section simply provides a brief overview of each formal assignment.

1. Overcoming Fear (Diagnostic)—500 words, 10 points
   In at least 500 words, describe a time you overcame a fear. The purpose of this essay is to help me get acquainted with your writing style and to get to know you a little better.

2. Decoding Propaganda Rhetorical Analysis—1,000 words, 120 points

In at least 1,000 words, analyze the rhetorical strategies used by the U.S. government in a piece of propaganda of your choice, and connect it to the historical context we have discussed in class. The purpose of this essay is to build your analytical writing skills and to test your grasp on the historical context of the Cold War.

3. Confronting Cultural Anxiety Argumentative Research Paper—1,250 words, 160 points
   In at least 1,250 words, identify and research a current cultural anxiety present in the world today. This paper is argumentative in that you will be using scholarly research to argue that your chosen cultural fear a) exists and b) is a valid or invalid fear. The purpose of this essay is to build your research and argumentation skills and to give you a foundation for your Project.

4. Project—Variable word count, 200 points
   In a multimedia group project, write, shoot, direct, and act in a short film—or other project—about a current cultural fear. The specific details—topic, genre, medium, and audience—are your choice (and we will discuss this in more detail later). The purpose of this project is to give you a way to make a real impact with what you've learned about fear. This project is worth 200 points. Additionally, this project will be shown publicly at a film-showing event, so plan accordingly.

5. Project Justification and Reflection—1,000 words, 150 points
   In at least 1,000 words—written individually—justify the artistic and rhetorical choices made by your group for the Project. Additionally, explain the specific things you contributed to the Project, and reflect on whether (or how) this Project has allowed you to think differently about your culture or society. The purpose of this paper is to help me fairly grade the Project and to give you time and space to reflect on your writing process.

6. Cover Letter—500 words, 100 points
   In at least 500 words, construct a cover letter addressed to me, letting me know what you feel you learned over the semester, as well as the most and least helpful parts/assignments/lessons of this semester. The purpose of this assignment is to help you reflect on this semester and what you've learned during my class (which is helpful to me and to you!). It also gives you experience writing a type of document that you will encounter in many different academic and career settings.

7. Portfolio—115 points

For your portfolio, you will collect the rough and final drafts of each formal writing assignment done in class (excluding the diagnostic, which will only have a final draft), totaling 11 documents at 10 points each. In addition, you will be graded on the format, for an additional 5 points. This totals 115 points.

APPENDIX B

Reflection Template

PBL Class Reflection:

Students' Attitudes: _____

_____

_____

_____

Participation: _____

_____

_____

_____

What went well? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What could be improved? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Individual Interviews: During the Project

1. What is the topic of your project?
2. So far, what—if anything—have you learned through the process of working on the project? Please explain.
3. What have been the most challenging parts of this project? Please explain.
4. What have been the most rewarding or satisfying parts of this project? Please explain.
5. In what ways is this project better or worse than a written (i.e. essay) assignment? Please explain.
6. If you were given the chance to go back in time and change anything about the project assignment, what would you change? Why?
7. To the best of your knowledge, have you ever been in a Project-Based Learning class?

Focus Group Interview: After Completing the Project

1. Now that it is complete, what—if anything—did you learn through working on the project? Please explain.
2. What were the most challenging parts of this project? Please explain.
3. What were the most rewarding or satisfying parts of this project? Please explain.
4. To what extent did the project help you fulfill the learning outcomes for this class? (Outcomes will be provided). Please explain.

    Course Learning Outcomes:

    7. Write about primary and secondary texts on the course theme in a manner that reflects the ability to read critically
    8. Engage in a process approach to writing college-level prose
    9. Produce rhetorically effective college-level expository prose
    10. Produce well researched academic arguments and appeals that are documented in accordance with the MLA style manual

11. Examine one topic from at least three disciplinary perspectives, two of which are in the Humanities Commons
12. Examine one topic with attention to difference such as race, class, gender, and/or sexuality.

5. Given the definition of Project-Based Learning, to what extent did the project meet that definition? (Definition will be provided). Please explain. (Scale from 1 to 10)
6. Do you think the project should continue to be a part of this ENG 200 class moving forward? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D

Interview Data Tables

Table D1
Comment Data from Focus Group A

		Group A		
Category	Sub-Category	Number of Comments	Percent of Group Total Comments	Percent within Category
Choice		9	8.7	
	Positive	7	6.8	77.8
	Negative	2	1.9	22.2
Ownership		15	14.6	
	Content Knowledge	4	3.9	26.7
	Permanence	5	4.9	33.3
	Self-Expression	6	5.8	40.0
Authenticity		19	18.4	
	Real-World Implications	5	4.9	26.3
	Social Connections	14	13.6	73.7
Education		34	33.0	
	Context	12	11.7	35.3
	Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)	16	15.5	47.1
	Problem Solving	6	5.8	17.6
Technical Skills		26	25.2	
	Genre/ Technological	10	9.7	38.5
	Writing/Rhetoric	16	15.5	61.5
Total		103		

Table D2

Comment Data from Focus Group B

		Group B		
Category	Sub-Category	Number of Comments	Percent of Group Total Comments	Percent within Category
Choice		8	15.1	
	Positive	6	11.3	75.0
	Negative	2	3.8	25.0
Ownership		8	15.1	
	Content Knowledge	0	-	-
	Permanence	4	7.5	50.0
	Self-Expression	4	7.5	50.0
Authenticity		12	22.6	
	Real-World Implications	3	5.7	25.0
	Social Connections	9	17.0	75.0
Education		16	30.2	
	Context	5	9.4	31.3
	Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)	6	11.3	37.5
	Problem Solving	5	9.4	31.3
Technical Skills		9	17.0	
	Genre/ Technological	5	9.4	55.6
	Writing/Rhetoric	4	7.5	44.4
Total		53		

Table D3

Combined Comment Data from Focus Groups A and B

		Combined		
Category	Sub-Category	Number of Comments	Percent of Group Total Comments	Percent within Category
Choice		17	10.9%	
	Positive	13	8.3%	76.4%
	Negative	4	2.6%	23.6%
Ownership		23	14.7%	
	Content Knowledge	4	2.6%	17.4%
	Permanence	9	5.8%	39.1%
	Self-Expression	10	6.4%	43.5%
Authenticity		31	19.9%	
	Real-World Implications	8	5.1%	25.8%
	Social Connections	23	14.7%	74.2%
Education		50	32.0%	
	Context	17	10.9%	34.0%
	Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)	22	14.1%	44.0%
	Problem Solving	11	7.1%	22.0%
Technical Skills		35	22.4%	
	Genre/ Technological	15	9.6%	42.9%
	Writing/Rhetoric	20	12.8%	57.1%
Total		156		

APPENDIX E

Project Assignment Sheet

"Project"

We have been discussing cultural fears for the past several weeks. We have seen how destructive and persuasive they can be; we have dissected their arguments; and we have even proven that some of them are justified.

Most recently, we have started to see how the fears of the 1950s and 60s could be manipulated in the media to get people to think, feel, or act certain ways. This could be positive—like the Twilight Zone episodes, each with a good message at the end—or negative—like the paranoid and sugar-coated PSAs

Now, it is your turn to take a current cultural fear—one that is justified or not—along with your knowledge of rhetoric, to get our 21st century public to think, feel, or act in whatever way you think they should.

The project can take any form you want it to, as long as it fulfills the following:

1. It must be centered around a current cultural fear.

This does not have to be one that you or your group-mates wrote about in your research papers. It *can* be, but does not *have* to be.

2. It must have a goal.

What do you want people to do/think/feel after hearing/watching/reading your message? Think back to the goals of the PSAs and the Twilight Zone episodes; or, think about a current campaign—what are they calling you to do?

3. It must have a particular audience.

Who is this aimed towards? Think about their wants, needs, assumptions, likes, dislikes. Use those to your advantage. After all, an ad that might convince *you* of something may not convince your elderly neighbor!

4. It must be multi-media in some way.

As mentioned in class, research papers—in fact, most writing—doesn't reach or convince most of the public. So, you will need to think outside the box. Do you want to make a video of some kind (PSA, short film, music video, etc.)? A social media campaign? An app? Anything! Be creative! (…But also remember you only have a few weeks to complete it; plan accordingly).

Be sure to think about what kind of format will match your goal and audience. For example, a social media campaign run through Instagram would probably not match an audience of old men.

As long as your project accomplishes those four criteria, the sky is the limit!

Oh, and a reminder: these projects will be shown off at the end of the semester. I am working on getting together a film showing/project presentation night near the end of the semester, where both of my classes will show off their projects.

It will be laid-back, so don't worry too much! I plan to have snacks (maybe order pizza?) and invite some of the other grad students. You are also free to invite your friends—the more the merrier!

Again, the event is still in the planning stages, but I plan for it to be a fun, laid back night where we can all get together, hang out, and enjoy all of the hard work you will have done this semester!

(As far as dates go, I don't have one chosen, but here in the next couple weeks, I will pass around some kind of sheet of dates/times to see what works for everyone.)