Pedagogy

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PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN SECONDARY SCHOOL HUMANITIES: PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTION, LEARNER AUTONOMY, AND DEEP LEARNING

Summary. *Contemporary secondary education increasingly emphasises the development of students' capacity for meaningful learning, critical information analysis, and independent knowledge construction. This article examines project-based learning (PBL) as a pedagogical approach with significant potential for fostering learner autonomy, analytical thinking, and metacognitive skills within humanities subjects at the secondary school level. Drawing on a review of research in project-based and problem-oriented learning, as well as reflective analysis of pedagogical practice, the paper describes a staged model for organising project work within classroom time. Particular attention is given to the teacher's role as facilitator and to the significance of formative assessment and structured reflection throughout the learning process. The findings indicate that PBL, when implemented as a sequential, supported, and reflective process, promotes the formation of durable learning strategies, the development of student independence, and deeper engagement with humanities content. The practical contribution of the article lies in a step-by-step pedagogical model grounded in teacher reflection and adaptable to standard school curricula.*

Key words: *project-based learning, humanities education, learner autonomy, pedagogical reflection, metacognitive skills, secondary school.*

Introduction. Contemporary schooling faces increasing pressure to move beyond reproductive knowledge transmission towards enabling students to engage critically and independently with information, interpret it meaningfully, and apply it in unfamiliar contexts. Traditional instructional approaches primarily oriented towards knowledge delivery and recall have proven insufficient for cultivating the competencies demanded in the twenty-first century, including critical thinking, intellectual autonomy, and personal responsibility for one's own learning (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Hilton & Pellegrino, 2012).

The humanities — history, literature, and social studies — hold considerable potential for developing these capacities, as they are inherently concerned with interpretation, source analysis, perspective-taking, and argumentation. Yet in practice, this potential frequently goes unrealised due to the dominance of examination-oriented approaches and the fragmented use of active learning methods.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the possibilities of project-based learning in secondary school humanities, drawing on relevant research and reflective examination of pedagogical practice, and to propose a staged model of project organisation that promotes learner autonomy and deep content understanding.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review. Project-based learning has a long pedagogical tradition, rooted in progressive educational philosophy and most prominently associated with the work of John Dewey. In contemporary scholarship it is broadly defined as a form of instruction in which students acquire knowledge and skills through the investigation of meaningful questions and the creation of purposeful products (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015; Thomas, 2000). Recent reviews and meta-analyses suggest positive effects on academic

outcomes and selected competencies, particularly when projects are well designed and supported (Chen & Yang, 2019; Condliffe et al., 2017).

Contemporary models of PBL emphasise the need for a careful balance between student agency and structured teacher support. Research by Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) cautions that overly minimised guidance may produce cognitive overload and shallow learning, particularly among students with underdeveloped learning strategies. Accordingly, scholars highlight the importance of staged instructional scaffolding, transparent assessment criteria, and ongoing formative feedback (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007; Larmer et al., 2015).

Of particular relevance to this study is the concept of 'deep learning', understood as the integration of knowledge, skills, and metacognitive awareness (Huberman et al., 2014; Miller & Krajcik, 2019). In the humanities, deep learning manifests in students' ability to analyse primary and secondary sources, construct interpretations, and reflect critically on the reasoning underlying their conclusions. This stands in contrast to surface-level learning, which is characterised by fragmented recall and the absence of meaningful knowledge integration (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Research on metacognitive development highlights that students who regularly engage in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning demonstrate greater academic resilience and transferable skill acquisition (Bell, 2010; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). PBL offers a structured context in which such metacognitive habits can be explicitly cultivated through iterative project cycles involving reflection and peer feedback.

Learner autonomy — defined as students' capacity and willingness to take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991) — is widely recognised as both a goal and a prerequisite for effective PBL. In humanities education, autonomy development is closely linked to students' growing ability to select and evaluate sources, formulate interpretive questions, and make

evidence-based arguments. Crucially, however, autonomy is not a fixed trait that students either possess or lack; it is a capacity developed gradually through repeated exposure to guided, structured opportunities for independent decision-making (Larmer et al., 2015; Ravitz, 2010).

Methodology. This article is grounded in a qualitative, practitioner-inquiry approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Rather than treating PBL as an abstract methodology, the analysis examines it as a living pedagogical practice situated within specific classroom conditions. The empirical material informing the analysis includes three interconnected sources: systematic reflective journals maintained by the teacher across multiple project cycles; structured observations of student activity during project work; and analysis of the learning products created by students within the projects.

This approach draws on the tradition of reflective practitioner research established by Schon (1983) and further developed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), who argue that teachers' systematic inquiry into their own practice generates a distinctive and valuable form of professional knowledge. The analysis does not claim statistical generalisability; rather, it aims to identify stable pedagogical patterns and articulate the conditions under which PBL proves effective in humanities contexts. Such transferable insights are of particular value to practitioners seeking research-informed guidance for classroom implementation.

Findings: A Staged Model of Project-Based Learning

Reflective analysis of pedagogical practice consistently indicates that the effectiveness of PBL in humanities subjects increases substantially when project activity is organised primarily within classroom time rather than delegated to independent homework. Collaborative in-class work allows the teacher to support the learning process step by step, identify student difficulties as they arise, and adjust learning strategies in real time. This finding aligns with concerns raised by Kirschner et al. (2006) regarding the risks of unsupported independent work, and

with research demonstrating that class-based implementation reduces inequity of outcomes by ensuring all students receive timely scaffolding (Darling-Hammond, 2008).

The optimal format for implementation consists of organising project work within a single thematic module or instructional unit spanning several consecutive lessons. This structure preserves the coherence of subject content and avoids the fragmentation that characterises isolated project assignments. Research consistently confirms that sustained, well-structured projects are more effective in fostering deep understanding and durable learning skills than short-term tasks (Chen & Yang, 2019; Thomas, 2000).

Stages of the Project Cycle

Analysis reveals that PBL is most productive when structured as a phased process that unfolds across the duration of a thematic unit. The following five stages were identified as forming an effective and coherent project cycle.

Stage 1: Topic Selection and Problem Framing. Students are offered a range of thematic directions connected to the unit of study. The opportunity to choose from a structured set of options cultivates a sense of ownership and personal investment in the project, which research identifies as a significant driver of learning motivation (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Larmer et al., 2015).

Stage 2: Research and Source Work. Information work takes place in class under teacher guidance. Students analyse both core curricular and supplementary sources, learn to distinguish between primary and secondary materials, compare perspectives, and justify their source selections. The teacher acts as a facilitator, helping students structure their inquiry and formulate research questions. This deliberate scaffolding of information literacy is essential for developing the analytical habits central to humanities disciplines.

Stage 3: Planning and Product Design. Students independently determine the format of their final project output (analytical poster, model, video, visual reconstruction, or similar), aligning the chosen form with the content and purpose

of their inquiry. This stage advances the development of design thinking and fosters responsibility for self-directed decisions, key competencies associated with twenty-first-century learning (Hilton & Pellegrino, 2012).

Stage 4: Creation and Revision. Students integrate the outcomes of their research and creative work, refining their argumentation and project structure. Continuous formative feedback from the teacher and peers supports iterative improvement and deepens content understanding. The iterative nature of this stage is central to PBL's effectiveness: research shows that revision cycles driven by feedback are more productive than single-draft completion (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

Stage 5: Presentation and Reflection. Projects are presented to an audience of peers, followed by structured self-assessment and peer evaluation based on criteria developed in advance. Reflection enables students to evaluate not only the final product but the learning process itself. This meta-level engagement is consistent with Moon's (2004) understanding of reflection as a mechanism for consolidating and transforming experience into durable knowledge.

Taken together, this five-stage model creates conditions for the gradual formation of durable learning competencies, including information analysis, independent planning, argumentation, and reflection. The key insight is that no single stage is sufficient in isolation; it is their sequential integration within a coherent unit that generates sustained and transferable learning gains.

Formative Assessment as a Structural Element

A central element of effective project implementation is formative assessment. Assessment criteria are developed prior to the commencement of each project and are used at every stage of the cycle. This enables students to monitor their own progress, adapt their strategies, and gradually develop metacognitive skills associated with planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). When criteria are made explicit and discussed collaboratively, students gain not only evaluative

tools but a shared language for discussing quality, which further deepens their engagement with the subject matter.

Discussion. The successful implementation of PBL is directly connected to a transformation in the teacher's professional role. In contrast to the traditional instructional model centred on knowledge transmission, PBL requires the teacher to function simultaneously as a curriculum designer, facilitator, and reflective practitioner (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2008). This shift is non-trivial and demands both professional preparation and a willingness to relinquish direct control over student learning trajectories.

During the planning phase, the teacher acts as an architect of the learning environment, determining content parameters, the logic of stages, and assessment criteria. Research □tandardiz that this structure must be sufficiently clear without being excessively rigid, leaving adequate space for students' independent decisions. It is precisely this quality of 'guided autonomy' that research associates with the development of academic responsibility and initiative (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

During project implementation, the teacher's role shifts towards mentoring and support. The teacher assists students in formulating research questions, clarifying their project design, analysing sources, and aligning the product's form with its content. Of particular importance here is what scholars have described as a culture of questioning: posing questions oriented towards explanation, justification, and critical reflection stimulates the development of analytical and metacognitive skills (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007).

This □tandardize□□zation of the teacher's role resonates with broader critiques of □tandardize□ educational models. As Robinson and Aronica (2015) argue, the educator's task is not to □tandardize student thinking, but to create conditions in which individual abilities, interests, and creative potential can be expressed. The facilitating stance inherent in PBL thus positions pedagogical

work as the design of an educational environment that sustains student independence and initiative.

Teacher Reflection as Professional Development

A significant element of the pedagogical practice analysed here was systematic teacher reflection, documented through ongoing reflective journals. These records facilitated the tracking of instructional dynamics, the analysis of emerging difficulties, and the calibration of pedagogical decisions across consecutive project cycles. Reflection functioned not as a supplementary activity but as a central instrument of professional development — a finding consonant with Schon's (1983) concept of 'reflection-in-action' and with Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) positioning of teacher inquiry as a legitimate form of professional knowledge generation.

Reflective records indicate that as experience with project work accumulated, the teacher progressively transferred greater responsibility for planning and learning oversight to students. Concurrently, formative assessment and collaborative discussion of quality criteria assumed greater prominence. This gradual handover of responsibility corresponds to what researchers describe as 'gradual release of responsibility' (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), a widely endorsed model for building learner independence through structured scaffolding that is progressively withdrawn.

Furthermore, the analysis confirms that PBL functions not only as a method for student learning but also as a vehicle for teacher professional development. Sustained pedagogical reflection, the analysis of classroom situations, and the iterative adaptation of practice promote professional flexibility and deepen instructional expertise. In this respect, PBL creates a dual learning environment: one that simultaneously advances student competence and teacher knowledge.

Conclusion. Project-based learning in secondary school humanities represents an effective pedagogical approach for fostering deep content understanding, learner autonomy, and metacognitive skill development. The

evidence reviewed and the reflective analysis presented here together demonstrate that PBL's effectiveness is maximised when it is implemented as a staged, in-class, formatively assessed process supported by ongoing teacher reflection.

A central conclusion of the analysis is that the determining factor in PBL's effectiveness is not the project format itself, but the quality of pedagogical facilitation and reflective practice. Without a conscious and evolving teacher role as facilitator and analyst of the learning process, project work risks becoming a formal task that fails to produce deep learning. The teacher's systematic inquiry into their own practice is therefore not incidental but constitutive of effective PBL.

The staged model proposed in this article offers a research-grounded and practically applicable framework for teachers in humanities subjects seeking to implement PBL within standard curricular constraints. By embedding project activity within thematic units, aligning it with formative assessment, and treating teacher reflection as a professional obligation rather than an optional extra, educators can create conditions in which both students and teachers grow as learners.

This work points towards several productive avenues for future research: longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of repeated PBL cycles on student metacognitive development; comparative analyses of PBL implementation across different humanities disciplines; and exploration of the professional learning trajectories of teachers who systematically employ reflective practice in PBL contexts.

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