IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT-BASED LEARNING METHOD IN A SOCIAL WORK CLASSROOM: MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS - A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: This article presents a classroom experience with the application of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) method in the Social Work specialization during the second year of study. Our aim was for PBL to focus on improving foreign language communication skills while also promoting greater awareness of mental health issues within the community. Although there was room for improvement, the project led to significant student progress. Students developed a deeper understanding of mental health issues, enhanced their research skills, and improved their English proficiency, particularly in vocabulary. While students initially struggled with setting objectives and "learning how to learn," they ultimately succeeded in creating accessible, engaging final products—a handbook and a blog. Their main challenge lay in understanding the method, and difficulties were encountered in establishing objectives and expected outcomes. Overall, the project fostered growth in the social work domain and supported the development of language proficiency skills.

Key words: Project Based Learning, social work, students, mental health, English as a foreign language

1. A Brief historical overview

It is widely recognized that William Killpatrick has introduced the idea of using "projects" in classroom, so we can assume the history of PBL is rooted back in 1918, when Kilpatrick came to the light with his article "The Project Method". But the ideas of "learning by doing" date back to ancient thinkers, namely Confucius and Aristotle. Kilpatrick's idea was embraced and gained popularity as well as some criticism.

Another leading figure of American progressive pedagogy and also close friend with Kilpatrick, John Dewey, has found some major flaws in Kilpatrick' s theory, especially in the approach of the cognitive act - seen as an iterative process, with conceptual and practical obstacles. The differences and similarities between their educational theories still constitute an open topic, explained and argued by Ari Sutinen, in a highly cited article.

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As a student-centered approach among others (inquiry-based, problem-based learning), PBL is the most exciting and the most applicable method nowadays. To give to the student a central role in the play is not that simple as it seems: teachers are required to redesign and rethink old methods and strategies, focusing on creative thinking, collaboration and a broad vision to raise and maintain the classroom involvement. In this regard, another over cited paper could be seen as foundations brick. When Krajkic and collaborators published their article, in 1994, they provided a valuable guidance in the implementation of PBL. Addressed to middle grade science teachers, the main goal of the article is to learn teachers how to use projects to promote active learning in science classes and also to provide help and support to teachers, in order to face difficulties appeared in practice.

Moreover, the authors elaborate a very detailed theoretical framework of project-based instruction, revealing how to ensure teachers' backgound and the importance of collaboration among different teachers, universities and researchers. Undoubtedly, the study presents and describes study-cases of PBL, from the starting point to the end. But the literature regarding how to practice PBL is so broad and we do not propose to exhaust the topic, nor do we claim to cover the vastness of the subject.

Back to 1991, from the field of motivational psychology, a title drew our attention: "Motivating Project-Based Learning. Sustaining the Doing, Supporting the Learning". Here, Blumenfeld and others throw a psychological perspective on PBL, stating that the interest and value students attribute to PBL and its elements, will affect the engagement in the project (Blumenfeld et al., 1991, p.375). Another major aspects that can lead to high levels of engagement are freedom and challenge (Wurdinger et al, 2007, p.154), but the perfect recipe and the equilibrium between challenge, freedom, interest, knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and scaffolding instruction is still a real issue for the uninstructed practitioners. The literature review has shown that Project-based learning can be explored in various contexts, starting with preschooling stage and ending with higher education. At any age one can be subjected to a PBL experiment.

PBL is often seen as a question generator that always seeks to offer solutions in a way that produces active learning through project engagement. It is conceived to foster self-regulated learning and to promote conceptual learning. The whole literature mentions some basic characteristics: common goal, driving questions, self-discovering answers, investigation and reflection. As a practical teaching strategy, became quickly the most useful tool for medicine, sciences, engineering, math (STEM) and lately, the use of PBL in literature and social sciences has been demonstrated.

An important observation upon literature review belongs to Kokotsaki, D. and Menzies, V. and Wiggins, pointing out the fact that "Most of the reviewed studies did not involve random allocation of participants to control and experimental groups and, as a result, a causal link between project-based learning instruction and positive student outcomes cannot be established with certainty." (Kokotsaki, D., Menzies, V. & Wiggins 2016, p.3).

Despite the vast literature and thousands of articles and scientific papers dedicated to PBL, one phenomenon can be predicted: as PBL grows in popularity and success, it is expected to gain more advocates and more problematic aspects will emerge from

practice. It is an "open-arhitecture" (Wrigley, 2007, p.167) in continuous development and it will challenge larger educational communities, resulting in more diverse and significant scientific papers.

2. PBL in the field of Social Work

The field of social work, inherently grounded in the humanistic sciences, has long recognized the value of project-based learning (PBL) as a pedagogical approach. Ashey Davis and Devon Reber conducted a study at undergraduate students in the Social Work program, based on a Project-Based Learning (PBL) design. Their findings support the idea that ,,In order for social work graduates to be equipped to advance human rights and social and economic justice, social work educators—in the classroom and in the field— need to support their development of this core competency through meaningful, context-specific activities and responsibilities" (Davis & Reber, 2016, p.151). This is particularly relevant for social work undergraduates, who must be prepared to navigate the complex social, economic, and political landscapes they will encounter in their professional practice.

One of the core competencies of social work education, as mandated by the Council on Social Work Education, is the advancement of human rights and social and economic justice. Social workers often serve those affected by mental health issues and advocate for policies that protect their rights. In this way, social workers help bridge gaps by connecting individuals to mental health resources, advocating for supportive policies, and raising awareness of mental health as a critical aspect of human rights. Project-based learning provides an ideal platform for students to engage with these issues. Through the implementation of community-based projects, social work students can apply their knowledge and skills to address the needs of vulnerable populations, advocate for policy changes, and promote social and economic equity.

The integration of project-based learning in social work education can also facilitate the development of self-directed practice, population-based practice, and a refocus on basic skills. By engaging in projects that require them to assess community needs, develop intervention strategies, and collaborate with various stakeholders, students can cultivate the competencies necessary for effective social work practice in healthcare and other settings.

Additionally, focusing on diversity, vulnerable populations, and issues of oppression within project-based learning can deepen students' understanding of social complexities and enhance their readiness for real-world practice. By addressing these critical topics through applied projects, social work students can develop a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between individual, social, and environmental factors that shape human behaviour and well-being.

Project-Based Learning is structured around real-world problems that do not have simple solutions. Instead of lectures, students work in groups to identify what they need to learn to solve the problem, then research and apply their knowledge. Teachers facilitate, rather than lecture.

3. Objectives

Starting from the considerations mentioned above and being myself a member of a target group within an Erasmus+ project, I decided that it is necessary to apply the method both as a teaching strategy and as a way to orient the professional competencies of my students, who will become future social workers. Moreover, since it was a practical English language course, I also aimed at developing reading, speaking, and writing skills because PBL is a promising approach in the field of foreign language education, offering a dynamic and engaging way for students to develop their linguistic and communicative competencies. For me, as a teacher, the most important aspect was the development of language skills, following the CEFR descriptors. As this is a practical English course specialized in the field of social work, the overall objective is to enhance the knowledge and skills students need to develop in order to act effectively as future social workers in real-life situations.

Background: The average students' level was B2, and I intended for the PBL approach to raise it to B2+ (upper intermediate). Their English proficiency is heterogeneous, with some students at A2 and a few at C1 (advanced). Over the past year, based on assessment sheets, I observed that their main challenges are in spoken interaction and spoken production, with an average class level indicating A2. They can exchange simple information in routine situations, communicate basic information on familiar topics such as personal details, daily activities, and basic needs, and engage in short social exchanges, though they may struggle to fully understand or continue conversations without assistance. For spoken production, they could use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms what social work is, what social workers do and where they work, and they could describe social work clients, skills, as well as the basic principles and values.

For English proficiency, I targeted the specific standards of the B2 level of the CEFR: "can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue, giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options." (CEFR Common reference levels). That is why, firstly, I had to set some attainable objectives, according to the B2+ level. These were later transformed into evaluation and self-evaluation rubrics, included in the project.

4. Materials and Methods

I applied the PBL method during one semester, the target group being second-year students majoring in social work. The meeting with the students happened to be on the very day when Mental Health Day was celebrated, so I took the opportunity to address questions and raise interest on this topic. The students began to share cases of people they know who struggle with anxiety and depression, discussing their attitudes towards them and how these individuals were perceived by society. The discussion engaged

everyone, with each student sharing their perspective and personal experiences. The discussion also highlighted the opinions about the attitudes and perceptions that Romanians have about mental illnesses. The method I use in the practical English course is the CLIL method. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach in which subjects are taught in a foreign language, with the dual focus on both the subject matter and the language learning. This method aims to teach both the content of a specific subject and the language skills necessary to understand and communicate in that language.

In our case, I had to focus on three aspects:
a) use of the English language proficiency (free speaking, give descriptions, express viewpoints and develop arguments without searching for words/signs, using some complex sentences with specialized vocabulary)
b) specific subject: mental health issues (do they know enough about the subject, or do they need to improve their knowledge?)
c) learning process and active involvement in instructional design (are they capable of designing a learning unit on this topic? What is the benefit of this learning unit for them? What is the final product of this unit?)

Starting from everyday life events, discussing the difficulties faced by people with mental health issues in integrating, as well as the role of the social worker in community life, students concluded that, often, a person with a mental illness is stigmatized and discriminated against at work, in relationships with family and friends, and even by the educational system, citing cases of bullying they witnessed in middle school and high school. In addition to promoting equitable and just healthcare initiatives, numerous social work professionals, including those in mental health, are involved in evaluating, diagnosing, and treating emotional problems, behavioral disorders, and mental health conditions. Some questions posed to lead the discussion were: "Can we recognize a person with mental health issues at first glance?" "Do we know how to interact with such a person?" "Can we reduce society's perception of such individuals?" "How?"

As a natural consequence of the discussion, students expressed their desire to learn more about this topic because it will help them develop professionally and assist the community in which they live.

For students, our discussion about mental health presented a challenging scenario that allowed them to determine what steps they could take and what solutions would be effective in enhancing community awareness, minimizing stigma, and promoting a more tolerant society towards mental illnesses. They also pointed out that if teenagers knew more about mental illnesses, it would help avoid stigma and bring about a change in society's attitude towards these individuals.

Having fulfilled the first basic condition of PBL, namely the "real-world problem," we moved on to the second step, planning.

5. The Process

Out of the 15 students in the group, 2 teams were formed for this topic. In this article, we will only present the results and the process of the project just for one group. Some

students did not wish to participate for various reasons (limited foreign language skills, time management difficulties, reluctance to collaborate, etc.). Since the topic of mental health is quite broad, I suggested narrowing the research area, although the ideas were quite generous: stress management for teenagers, understanding and combating stigma around mental illness, the role of social media in mental well-being, and the importance of mental health resources in schools.

Team 1	PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET
Topic Project title	Mental health awareness "*Decode Your Mood: A Teen's Guide to Understanding Mental Health*
Duration	10 weeks
Objective	Raise awareness among teens, produce a change in perception
Driving questions	"How can teens easily recognize signs and symptoms of mental health problems and behavioral disorders?" ,"How can we change society's perception towards mental health issues?"
Learning goals	Identify and explain key mental health concepts; Develop Communicative Skills; Recognize and articulate the importance of mental health awareness and empathetic approaches in social work; Produce clear, age-appropriate educational materials; Work in teams to research, design, and refine project materials; Deliver a final presentation
Project summary	Second-year social work students developed this PBL project to increase teens' awareness of mental health while enhancing their own language skills. Beginning with a community survey to assess mental health awareness, students learned about question design and data analysis. The project expanded from an informational brochure into a blog, *Overthinking*, offering teens accessible mental health resources. Throughout the project, students developed both their communication and English language skills, vital for future social work roles, highlighting the importance of clear, empathetic interaction in social work practice.
Major products	Informational brochure, blog
Evaluation criteria	Product criteria Language skills criteria The PBL Implementation Process Criteria

Fig.1. *Project Information Worksheet*

Throughout the 10 weeks, there were 5 in-class meetings to discuss the assigned topics. The students met on their own schedule, mainly through online meetings. During the in-class meetings, we used assessment sheets to track progress in language skill development and evaluation sheets. The students received tasks in the form of deliverables, either during meetings or on the Teams platform. Examples of such tasks are provided below. This was the project information sheet for team 1 (8 students).

Although the project title might not seem challenging for the higher education level,

we remind you that the students worked on, designed, and developed the final product exclusively in English to also enhance their communication skills in the foreign language. For each objective below, I have set a list of language skills involved. After the first in-person meeting in the classroom, the PBL group members scheduled weekly online meetings in Teams. They accepted my presence as an evaluator, and I participated in every second meeting, where they presented the results of their tasks. The biggest challenge for the students was to overcome the tendency to switch from the target language of communication to their natural language. Often, the tasks were partially written in Romanian.

   It was not easy at all for them to set the project's objectives, as there was confusion between the objectives regarding the final product and the PBL project and the learning objectives. We needed to refine the questions and objectives to ensure complete correspondence between what we expect and what we should do to achieve the expected result. Creating a powerful essential question usually involves drafting and refining the first version of the question. Questions were enriched to require students to grapple with complex issues, engage big ideas and learn content standards. For example, there was confusion between establishing the final result and the learning goals that needed to be considered. Below, we present their first attempt (a) and their last attempt (b, in italics). After assessing the first attempt, I guided them to formulate desired results in accordance with the main objective and the learning goals. They had difficulty in arranging the desired results in order of importance, thinking that the most important aspect was for them to learn about mental health issues, rather than changing society's perception.

	Desired result
1	a) Getting a better grasp of the chosen domain, namely mental illnesses *b) Raise awareness among teenagers regarding mental health issues, creating a handbook*
2	a) present information to more people, due to the increased importance it has *b) Achieving an impact on a large audience.*
3	Improving our article writing skills *Development of my English skills: reading, speaking, listening, and writing; enriching vocabulary and ease of oral communication; gaining fluency in English*
4	Doing in-depth research with the purpose of gathering new and varied information on a specific topic *new knowledge about mental health disorders*
5	a) Improving our team work skills b) (the same)
6	Understanding, in detail, how people really perceive the issues that we found (The lack of knowledge that the youth has on mental illnesses) *Change society's perception of mental illnesses, starting with the young/change the attitude of society, using podcasts/blogs*

Fig. 2. *The results expected in accordance with the learning goals*

The learning goals of the project were accompanied by a set of language skills. The language skills for this project include developing specific vocabulary related to mental health and practicing its use in both spoken and written contexts; use specific terminology related to mental health, mental illness, and behavioral disorders; reading comprehension skills (textbooks and articles). Students aim to improve their fluency and coherence in expressing complex ideas on mental health topics, ensuring clarity and depth in both oral and written forms. They also work on simplifying and adapting language to make information accessible to diverse audiences, enhancing their ability to communicate effectively. Collaborative communication skills are emphasized, with a focus on clear, structured, and engaging language to convey project ideas. Additionally, students practice interacting with fluency and spontaneity, actively participating in discussions, and presenting clear, detailed descriptions on a range of subjects related to their PBL project. They also learn to provide reasons and explanations for their opinions and plans and to write clear, detailed texts that effectively cover the project's subject matter.

The students were involved in the planning process, having a decision-making role for the proposed objectives. How did they design engaging activities? I suggested to them that PBL cannot be reduced to a simple activity of researching content and setting objectives, but it involves a series of diversified activities, mentioning exploration, research, collaboration, and problem-solving. Ideas: guest speakers (mental health professionals, individuals with lived experience, experts in the field, field trips (mental health organizations, community centers), local mental health statistics and surveys.

The group decided to conduct a survey to assess the extent to which mental health issues are known. Based on the survey results, they planned to address certain content aspects in detail or in a general manner. The questionnaire was written in Romanian, and the sample was 78 subjects. The conclusions were not sufficiently relevant to the project theme, but they provided a useful learning experience. Specifically, they learned how to formulate questions to obtain clear answers, which can influence the next steps of the project. And how to adapt the questions to receive validation or invalidation of the researched topic. Since creating, applying, and interpreting a questionnaire was not set as an objective, the questionnaire itself was not taken into account for the final assessment of the project.

The final product was, initially, an educational brochure for high school teens. Later, students had a second thought and supplied the brochure with a blog, called https://overthinkingwebsit.wixsite.com/overthinking (partially written in Romanian). In this way, they increased the impact of their product and broadened the audience. The final product was distributed in schools following the informational session on mental health.

The evaluation considered three aspects: product evaluation, process evaluation, and language skills evaluation. For each type of evaluation, we used different rubrics consisting of criteria, performance levels, and descriptors. Students used peer-evaluation. Based on a model, students established evaluation criteria for content, activities and the final product. For the language skills section, I suggested a self-assessment test, including rubrics such us: linguistic aspects (vocabulary and grammar, appropriate language in different contexts, pragmatic aspects focused on topics such as flexibility, fluency, and coherence); language production (addressing an audience, giving information and interaction.

6. Results

The project yielded positive outcomes, particularly in the quality and impact of the final product. The educational brochure and blog (*Overthinking*) successfully raised awareness among high school teens about mental health, effectively reaching the target audience through thoughtful distribution during informational sessions in schools. This demonstrated students' adaptability and commitment to extending their work's reach. Students' approach to supplementing the brochure with a blog demonstrated adaptability and strategic thinking, enhancing the product's impact.

The implementation process, while valuable, presented challenges. Students needed guidance to clarify project objectives and maintain consistent communication in English without reverting to their native language. Additionally, setting specific goals was initially difficult, as students confused the learning objectives with the final product goals. However, the PBL process fostered critical skills, such as team collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving, even though results in this area were less strong compared to the final product.

Significant progress was observed in vocabulary acquisition related to mental health. Students developed a specific lexicon for discussing mental health and behavioral disorders. A considerable number of new words entered their vocabulary, particularly names of mental health conditions. However, the verbal communication aspect did not achieve significant success, as the students used Romanian in their group meetings. Improvements in communicative skills, such as fluency and spontaneity in English, were less pronounced. While students could provide detailed descriptions and interact within structured discussions, they continued to struggle with spontaneous expression and fluid interaction. Despite this, the language component of the project provided a foundation for further communicative skill development in future practice.

7. Conclusions

Personally, I believe the project could have been better implemented, resulting in excellent outcomes. At the level of the content addressed, students gained a deeper comprehension of various mental health problems, including their symptoms, causes, and effects. In the regard of the research skill, they developed the ability to research and identify reliable sources of information related to mental health.

Regarding the field of social work, we believe that implementing PBL as an educational design method would be far more successful than the traditional structure. Due to the specific nature of this field, where students will engage with community-related issues and interact with diverse clients, practicing PBL from the early stages of their training would be a major benefit for their future integration into the workforce. The process highlighted certain areas for improvement. Setting clear, actionable objectives proved challenging for the students, revealing a need for more guidance in distinguishing learning goals from product goals. The difficulties in understanding and applying PBL can be reduced through the consistent use of the method. Initially, students believed that PBL was merely a research project and expected to present an archive of information

gathered from various sources, either in a PowerPoint or a summary format. The main obstacles were understanding how to set learning objectives and establish evaluation criteria and scales for each component. Additional challenges appeared in time management, while the greatest difficulty was using English as the "working language." While vocabulary acquisition was notable, especially regarding mental health terminology, the development of verbal communication skills was limited. Frequent use of Romanian during group meetings hindered students' ability to gain fluency and spontaneity in English. One side could be better improved, namely the connection between theory and practice. We could have bridged better the gap between classroom learning and real-world practice, but we lacked some conditions: the approaching winter break reduced the number of high school students available for the information presentation session and educational brochure.

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