

TITLE	Launching Your Unit With a Spark Experience		
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RELATED TOPICS (TAGS)	Curriculum Design	CATEGORY	Resource ▾

Learning Goals	Generate a plan for a 'spark experience' that invests students' in an upcoming PBL unit.
Artifact of Learning	Develop a preliminary plan for a student spark experience.
Time estimate	30 minutes, Narrative Context and Explanation , Activity

Narrative Context and Explanation

As a teacher, I'm always looking for ways to get my students excited about our units of study. I've worked hard to build strong relationships with my students, but I want them to be engaged in what we're studying because THEY want to learn it, not because they want to please me. I also want them to ask questions that they can come back to throughout our unit as they are motivated to answer them for themselves. That's starting to sound like a tall order, but luckily, there's a component of Project-Based Learning (PBL) that allows for all of those things to come about naturally in the classroom: the Spark Experience!

What is a Spark Experience? The name gives a clue: it's an experience you do with your class to introduce your new project or unit of study to "spark" or ignite their excitement to engage in learning. This experience is often dramatic or memorable in some way, but you don't need to have an unlimited budget to implement one. A spark experience also gets students wondering about how they can apply the project's content to their own lives, and helps students generate questions rather than requiring them to find the "correct" answer to a prescribed set of questions.

One year, for example, to "spark" our student-run coffee cart project, my class walked to a local bakery to understand how a business can serve their community. It inspired my students to ask how they could provide a similar service for our school community through their coffee cart, all while earning money for themselves. The following year, due to COVID regulations, my students

were not able to operate their coffee cart, but they still wanted to find a way to spread joy in our school community and earn spending money. For our spark experience, I delivered “joy boxes” filled with small gifts and a greeting card I hand-painted to each student’s home. We opened the boxes together on Zoom, as we were still in remote learning at the time. As a class, we discussed how sending “happy mail” is a great way to spread joy, so we decided to design and sell greeting cards. Although the projects we did those two years were pretty different, the essence of them was similar: both projects allowed my students to spread joy to others while earning money and practicing valuable business and life skills.



Activity

1. Watch [this video](#) to see an example of a spark experience. (Note: You will need to set up a FREE account with PBL Works to access this resource. I'm usually not a big fan of creating accounts here, there, and everywhere, but I promise this is worth it, as PBL Works has tons of great resources--all for FREE!)
2. Access your project planner (Check out this [project planner template](#))
3. Take a look at your Driving Question(s), Public Products, and Learning Goals.
4. Brainstorm a list of at least 3 experiences you could do with your students to get them excited about your project. In addition to generating enthusiasm, they should help your students start thinking about the essence of your project. For example, when I was brainstorming a spark experience for my student-run, COVID-safe, business project, my ideas were:
 1. Have students do random acts of kindness around the school to experience spreading joy;
 2. Have students visit a local grocery store to see examples of pre-packaged snacks we could sell in our coffee cart; and
 3. Deliver joy boxes to each student's house.
5. Share your list with a colleague and discuss the pros/cons of each possibility. Considering student interests, timing, staffing, and budget. Which experience best fits with your project and your context?

CREATOR

This activity was created by middle school teacher, Luisa Sparrow, with support from Passion to Teach Co-Lab facilitator, Jenny Morrison.

