

Details

Answers to Your Project-Based Learning Questions with Erin Murphy and Ross Cooper - 120

In this episode, leaders from the educational world and co-authors of the new book Project Based Learning: Real Questions. Real Answers, Erin Murphy and Ross Cooper join me for a discussion on all things PBL. You'll hear how you can empower your students with PBL and how their book will support your work every step of the way.

Do you want to learn more about Project Based Learning?

PBL is a powerful way to engage students in learning. It's an inquiry-based approach that allows students to explore and discover knowledge through hands-on projects, rather than just memorizing facts. In this episode, leaders from the educational world and co-authors of the new book Project Based Learning: Real Questions. Real Answers, Erin Murphy and Ross Cooper join me for a discussion on all things PBL. You'll hear how you can empower your students with PBL experiences and how their book will support your work every step of the way.

This podcast episode will help you get started with project based learning or improve what you're already doing so that it's even better for your students' success in school and beyond!

Introduction

Hello there and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast! If we haven't met before, my name is Monica Burns. I'm a former NYC public school teacher and I've been out of the classroom for a few years leading professional development for teachers, and writing about all things EdTech on my blog [ClassTechTips.com](https://classtechtips.com)

Before we jump into today's episode, a quick reminder — you can head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode, and if you're listening to this episode on a podcast player like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Google Podcasts, you should see a link in the description that you can click on as you listen today and it will take you to all of the resources I mention.

Promotion/Reminder

This episode is sponsored by Microsoft Education and I'm so excited to partner with them this summer. Have you seen the new Reading Progress tool in Microsoft Teams? It's totally free and will transform the way you think about reading fluency. I was completely blown away when I saw Reading Progress in action and I know you will be too. Just go to <https://aka.ms/ReadingProgressPP> to find out more about the free Reading Progress tool in Microsoft Teams. You can also send me a DM on Instagram and I'll make sure to get you the link.

Today's Intro

Today's episode is all about project-based learning and the burning questions you might have about all things PBL. Now today I'm talking to Ross Cooper and Erin Murphy who wrote a new book all about project-based learning I have known Ross for almost a decade now we're fellow Apple Distinguished Educators and I've known Erin for a while too, They have so many upgrade gems to share about project-based learning and I can't wait for us to jump in and talk all about it together. Let's get into the episode and as we talk today you'll hear me mention some resources don't worry they're all linked wherever you're listening to this episode or you can head to classtechtips.com/podcast where you'll also find the information from today the show notes page with all of the links you'll want to see.

Episode Transcript

Monica:

Welcome, Erin and Ross. I am so excited to have you on the podcast today to talk all things PBL. Before we jump into project-based learning, kind of the logistics, the things to consider, how to stay organized, all of those topics, and talk a little bit about your new book, I'm hoping that you can share a bit about your role in education, what your day-to-day looks like. Maybe, Erin, you can start off for us.

Erin:

Sure. So my official title is the K to 12 Humanities Supervisor for a school district just outside Allentown, Pennsylvania. My day-to-day usually looks like in pre-COVID times, spending a lot of time in classrooms, coaching teachers, coaching principals, thinking about instruction, instructional design. Recently though, my job has just been, I don't know, crisis response I guess. I think that's what most administrators have been doing.

Monica:

Yeah. And, Ross, what about you? What does your day-to-day look like? Tell us a little bit about your role.

Ross:

Yeah, so right now, I am an assistant principal at Roaring Brook School, in Chappaqua Central School District in Westchester, New York. The day-to-day to be honest, well kind of, as Erin said, outside of a pandemic, more leadership.

Ross:

Now, leadership as well, but a lot of management thrown in. Not that the two are mutually exclusive because in many instances, management and leadership go hand in hand. But this year in particular because of the pandemic, a lot of sub coverage. We're really into sub coverage, sub coverage scheduling, and just to be honest, just really making sure everybody's okay, taking care of people's basic needs, one-on-one conversations, small group conversations; sort of like when you meet with students, right? One-on-one, small group, and just really just making sure, just touching base with people on a regular consistent basis and just making sure everybody's okay and just helping to make sure that the school runs smoothly. That's a big part of what we're doing this year.

Monica:

Yeah. And I appreciate what you both said about the responsiveness of your roles, right, and the adaptability of what it is that you're doing. And I think that as we talk about this idea of project-based learning and your new book today, right, there can be a lot of moving parts just like in what it sounds like your day-to-days have been like all the time, but especially this year. And so that term, project-based learning, which we're talking about today, it might be new for some listeners or one that they've heard but isn't part of their everyday practice.

Monica:

Can you tell us a little bit? What does PBL mean? What does it look like in action?

Monica:

And I'll throw in-

Ross:

Erin, do you want to go?

Monica:

Either of you.

Ross:

Go ahead Erin.

Erin: You start! You start!

Ross:

Okay, I'll start.

Ross:

So, you have all these different definitions of project-based learning, and I think for any instructional shift or initiative, we tackle there could be multiple definitions. And I think it's very, to your kind of what you're getting at Monica, it's important that in any given organization, when we use these terms, whether it's project-based, learning, reading, and writing workshop, STEM, differentiated instruction, Makerspace, whatever, it might be that within our organization, when we use these terms, that we all mean the same thing. And I think oftentimes with professional learning, we jump over that kind of calibration a bit and we get right into like the so-called like cool stuff.

Ross:

Right.

Ross:

So I think to answer your question, to define project-based learning more or less, we look at it as an inquiry-based instructional unit, right? It's a unit, there's those lesson plans.

Ross:

And then there are those unit plans, right? We look at project-based, learning is more holistic teaching and learning. So it's the unit plan approach, but students are at the center of it through inquiry-based learning, which is teaching and learning primarily through investigation and exploration. That's really how we define project-based learning in short. Like that's like the elevator pitch. And then of course, you could get into certain components if you want. Right. You could get into, okay,

are we prioritizing standards? Is there, we call them high impact takeaways or enduring understandings or an umbrella question, which is also called an essential question. Self-assessment, peer assessment, mini lessons, extended lessons, student reflection, and publishing. So like, those could be like the different components that you might say as an organization or the non-negotiables of a project-based learning. Like every time we have a unit that we define as project-based learning, it must have those components. But in short, we look at it as a student-centered inquiry-based unit.

Monica:

Erin, what does this look like? You know, in action where you are or, and what you've been working on.

Erin:

Yeah. I think that it emerges in different ways. We, so our district actually launched a project-based school this year called The Jasper Learning Initiative . So right now I'll be honest, PBL happens more in pockets in my current district, but places that we consult with, I think that the in action part looks different in the way that Ross just described. Right. So depending on a teacher's readiness, a district's readiness, so some places are like, that's it, we're going to be all project-based all the time. This is what's happening. And often bring us in to sort of like roll it out where other places are like, we know this is a good practice in Jersey in particular, there are new state standards really aligned to the project-based approach. So, I think people are kind of thinking, okay, how do I get started? So I think the way Ross described it as a continuum is really how it needs to be thought of because different people can be at different places on that continuum and different environments, different groups of students, different content require a different place in that continuum also.

Monica:

Yeah. And I would imagine that when you're working or talking with a group of math educators at a secondary level, or with elementary educators, and a third or fourth or fifth grade classroom, that some of those conversations are different around what it might look like for them within a particular unit or a different part of the year or year four for them and their professional, implementation, bringing PBL into their environment and know whether an educator has a few years of experience or is jumping in for the first time. You know, one thing I often hear from classroom teachers, from coaches, even from school leaders who are thinking through the implementation, right. If something new is how to stay organized, right. The logistics

of what PBL might look like. And so, from that teacher perspective, do you have any tech tips?

Monica:

Do you have any tools or platforms that can help a teacher plan through and stay organized throughout that unit to interact with students as they are working through face-to-face or remotely, some of that project progress would love to hear what some of your go-to platforms or places are for recommending to educators.

Erin:

Yeah. I mean, we often don't like name drop specific tech tools just because I think, and this sounds redundant at this point, I think different people need different things. I'm hesitant to be like, Oh, you definitely want to do this in Schoology. If your district happens to be a Google classroom district, and then it feels like, Oh, I'm never going to be successful because I don't have Schoology. So I think that the real important thing is that whatever you pick, you should stick to it. So whatever that hub, we call it a digital hub. So whatever you choose to use as your digital hub, unless it's really not working and you need to like jump ship that's, that's cool. 'Cause it happens to all of us, but once you pick that thing and you sort of condition and prepare your students to use it and families for that matter, you don't want to constantly be pivoting to something else.

Erin:

So if you build everything in Schoology or if you build everything on a website, make sure that it's consistent, so that you're not constantly reteaching that specific practice. And then we sort of talk about the core things that should be available in that place. So you need to make sure that your project directions are there and often your project directions, you typically have like a static version and then an interactive version. So, you're going to want to make sure that those things are in that space. Whatever the kids are sort of filling out during a research project, that's going to be in that space. And again, my default for like interactive directions, is often a Google doc. But if you happen to be a Microsoft district and you're using, what is it, OneNote? I don't know. And you're using that instead. That's fine. Just make sure that then it's consistent. Yeah.

Monica:

I think too, one of the things I've been sharing with people this year, and I'm sure you all are kind of feeling that same way, is that embrace your place, right? Like what's

your LMS? What are you feeling comfortable with? What are tools, if you're already a Google docs person, right. Is that the place where you're going to have kids maybe collaborate or work together in some way? And Ross, I'd love to hear from you if you've got anything to add on there as well.

Ross:

Yeah. I think also all this creates predictability for us and the students, but it doesn't, it's important that it creates predictability. That then allows us that cuts through any like confusion and allows us to really put the emphasis on the project itself and the project's learning goals. So it's not really by having some of the same materials from project to project or the same platform from project to project or same place where we store everything from project to project that routine's important, right? It's not taking away inquiry. It's not taking away any investigation and exploration. It's something that we would do as adults. We tend to use certain apps. We tend to use certain programs on our computer and that's just the type of environment we're creating for our students. So on top of that, a couple other things I'll add one is that how you set up your digital hub, keeping that consistent from project to project as well.

Ross:

So there might be a couple of different sections, one of them's for maybe the content, maybe one of them are, or as a second section for our research. And then maybe there's another section where you could add something. That's not project specific like tools to help students with research or help them with presenting or like basically those resources that they're going to need to access across multiple projects. Right. This could be as simple as a Google doc, or it could be something like an LMS, Google Classroom, Schoology, Canvas, or whatever it might be. So just thinking about you're not just bringing consistency to what you're the platform that you're using, but also how you set up those resources for your students on the platform, I think is important. And we outline that in our book and I think I did a pretty good job of giving you a summary of it.

Ross:

So that's one. And then the other thing is, kind of, as Erin alluded to the common denominators, what are those things? Once again, regardless of the project that students are going to have. So we call them, we think directions should be one page; one page of directions, eight and a half by 11 piece of paper. One-sided right. So those are the directions. You have the interactive directions, you have your rubric, or

we call it a progress assessment tool, which is a simplified version of the rubric. Maybe you give students actually a physical folder, so they can store all project related papers there. So like all of those things that it's almost like a ritual, whenever there's a project, here are the things we're going to get. And once again, that routine helps to put the emphasis on the project and its learning goals and helps to cut through the confusion.

Monica:

Yeah. It sounds like that emphasis on systems and routines and just that sort of set of expectations that you're building for students can really help someone who might be kind of doing this for the first time, but anticipating that they're going to come back into this same format a few times over the course of the school year. So I think that's a really great way to set up kids for success, help them stay organized. And as you're thinking through that kind of organizational piece, there are so many transferable skills that come into play with giving kids an opportunity to take some ownership of what they're working on.

Monica:

Are there any strategies or any kind of pieces around that you really like to incorporate to help kids stay organized or take some ownership of that project?

Erin:

So I think that what we often lean on as an explanation related to this question of, how do we get kids to continue to take ownership? The less that we do by ourselves? And the more that we do with our students, the closer they're going to become, they're going to come to being able to take on that ownership themselves. So for example, rather than fully designing the rubric or the project assessment tool that Ross described, rather than doing all of that ourselves modeling or doing it with our students. So perhaps we identify what the learning targets are. So in this unit, these are the learning targets that we're going to need to hit.

Erin:

What might it look like while we do that? So then maybe we have kids look at exemplars, exemplar projects or exemplars of if it's a piece of writing or if it's a piece of a policy that we're having kids examine, have them look at examples and then extract from the examples, what that learning target might look like. So do that thinking with them. And then that allows them then to take ownership over the assessment process because now they were a piece of it. So it feels less like

something that was being done to them. And that helps them in the future. Right? Because we, as human beings doing our jobs are constantly thinking about, okay, am I doing this based on the metric it's going to be measured on?

Erin:

Am I doing, is there something that I personally want to do better related to this topic? So I get, it's sort of, as you said, it sort of models a good life skill moving forward.

Monica:

Yeah. And I think that's something that's definitely front of mind for educators when they're kind of talking about PBL or wondering about the value and why they might want to bring it in, or some of those kind of, all of these are real, everything we're doing in the real world feels like real-world skills, right. But things that are very transferable to different environments is sometimes how I frame it. And your book, which I've got a couple copies here in my office and I'm excited to give away to listeners, is all about project-based learning from a real questions, real answers perspective. So what are some of the top questions you hear or that you get from your work in the field or, or one that really jumps out to you that you want to share here that people can learn more about in the book?

Ross:

Yeah. So basically to expand upon what you said, each chapter, there's, I'm looking at the book now, nine, there's an introduction in eight chapters and each chapter is built around one of those questions, but also we made sure the way it's formatted is that as a result of reading through the book, not only will your questions be answered, but you'll learn how to actually do project-based learning. So it's not like a FAQ where you read all the answers and you're like, wait a minute. I still don't know how to do PBL. It's the best of both worlds. We believe.

Ross:

I think the biggest one we probably get, and we kind of lead with this one is like, how do we structure a PBL experience? Right. And we threw that at the reader right after that's chapter one, right after the introduction, which is why PBL it's, how do I structure a PBL experience?

Ross:

And we thought it was important to lead off with that because we frame that from the very beginning. And then for the most part, the rest of the book then fills in the gaps rather than explaining or detailing the entire experience throughout the duration of the book. We wanted the reader to have that context early on. We thought that was really important. And we think that's something else that's really unique to our books. So basically, how do I plan for it? I know that sounds maybe simple, but a lot of people like you hear about PBL, you read about PBL, you watch these videos. That's how it started for all of us. And you're like, how the heck do I plan for it? Like give me a template, give me something. And then, probably the other one is how do I get grades, right.

Ross:

And that, that's a really big one. And if you were to, even read a little bit into that chapter, which is chapter number two, we know that if we're asking that question, then maybe perhaps our thinking is in the wrong place, because we know that as much as possible, we want to put the emphasis on the feedback and then, and the assessment as opposed to grades. But of course we know that there are some instances in which grades are needed given the organizations and the constraints, our systems. So we have an answer for that as well, but the majority of the chapter is dedicated to feedback as it relates to a project learning goals or learning targets and then self-assessment and peer assessment. And that self-assessment, we think, is really vital. In order for students to really, you asked before about students having ownership over their own learning. Self-assessment is really one of those huge non-negotiables and one of those high impact teaching and learning practices that we could imply at all times, whether students are engaged or not engaged in project-based learning, really student self-assessment should be the cornerstone of any thriving classroom.

Monica:

And I love that. And you mentioned there that, the framing of the book or the organization of the book is yes, a response to these common questions, but then the action items that go along with it. So that idea of feedback and the assessment questions, I just think that's such a great way to, to organize a text. Then it kind of brings me to this last big question I want to pose to you all. And I always love hearing behind the scenes stories about working on books. And I know a lot of listeners here heard from different authors and the education space, and this isn't your first collaboration together, but what was it like working on this book? How was it different than the first time out?

Erin:

I'll start.

Erin:

Yeah, so, when we wrote the first book, I think we wrote the first book from start to finish, I think in like three months and we lived nearby each other at that time. And so sort of we each took a chapter and we kind of took a stab at it. And then we essentially locked ourselves in Ross's apartment for several weekends in a row, and then just went through the book and wrote it together. And that was ideal because Ross has really good taste in food. And he bought me a lot of really good food during that time. So writing *Hacking PBL* was probably my favorite. And then this book, instead of three months, took us almost three years. It took much longer. It started out sort of as one thing and turned into something else, which we love, but it definitely had quite the metamorphosis throughout the process for us that you can finish.

Ross:

Yeah. I mean, it started out as kind of , okay, we have a little bit more to say, let's do a visual PBL book. Let's do one that if some of the books that we cite are *Intention* by Dan Ryder and Amy Burvall, I think that's it. And *The Space* by Bob Dillon and Rebecca Hare, we saw those, Hey, we could do a PBL book like that. And then to be honest, I think it was too, we started it late. We signed the contract and it took us maybe half a year to get going from the time we signed the contract, just due to different things that kept coming up. And I remember I sat down, it was July 4th weekend, two years ago. I think it was two years ago and I just started writing and I started writing and I started writing and Erin was like, what the heck are you doing?

Ross:

I'm like, well, we have more to say so. And it really morphed into much more than we thought it would be kind of. And by the time we published that we had the minds, a couple of things two in particular. I think one is that probably our last book that we write on inquiry and PBL. So if we have something to say, let's make sure we say it now. And also the idea that we've written it in a way that at least I did that, almost to make our first book obsolete. Although the first book is still selling well, people should be buying the new book. It's the new book, it's new, better content. It's three times as big as the first book. Not that we're not proud of the first book, but I believe it.

Ross:

And I think Erin believes too. It encompasses all the good content from the first book plus a whole lot more. We didn't want it to be one of those things where it's , all right, you have to get both of our books. No, this is our latest and greatest book. This is the one we're promoting get this one. And I think we're very proud of it. It went through a lot of drama. A lot of stuff happened, from the signing of the contract to having the book in our hands. But we're very proud of it. We're very proud of it right now. I think it has an average five star rating on Amazon after 23 reviews and anybody who reads it, the feedback has been great.

Ross:

And lots of book studies too, but from organizations like people saying, Hey, I want 30 copies. I want to buy 70 copies. A lot of people saying probably more so than the first book. Hey, we want to get this into the hands of everybody in our organization. And that's, that's just cool. That's just really cool that never gets old. And then that's to say that you're going to base your school, your district's work. You're going to base your work on our work and our book, that's powerful. And that's just really, neat. And that means a lot. And that's really why we do this is to make a difference. And I think to take something as complex as project-based learning and convey what it is in a simple way, and that's tough, right. To take something complex and to communicate what it is in a simple, understandable way. That's an art form in and of itself. And I'd like to think that's what we accomplished with this book.

Monica:

Yeah. And I think too, I've got copies of your *Hacking PBL* here in my office as well. Right. You all have been so generous with gifting, some copies and, for the new book, we're going to do a giveaway here on the podcast. So listeners, wherever you're listening to this, there'll be details of that in the show notes. But I think this is such a powerful tool for people who might feel they need a little bit more right. That support and understanding around PBL as they get ready to jump in. And so Erin, before we finish up, I'd love for you to just share with us, where can people go to learn more about the book? Where can they go to learn more about your work?

Erin:

Yeah. So the best place to learn more about the book is to go to realpbl.com/. That's sort of a one-stop shop for everything book related. There was a ton of freebies there, eBooks, giveaways. And then in addition, when you have the book,

realpbl.com/ website was sort of built. Ross did a really nice job putting it together so that it like mirrors the book itself. So, if there's a place in the book where we say, Oh, you might want to use this resource or that resource rather than you having to go out and find it yourself, everything is linked to the website. So it's almost like a companion guide to the book.

Monica:

Awesome. And I know that both of your social handles and all of your contact info is right there at realpbl.com/m. And I will make sure to link to it in the show notes for today. So thank you both so much for joining in for today's episode.

Erin:

Thank you for having us.

Ross:

Thanks for having us.

So let's make this EdTech easy...

First, determine your PBL goals.

Next, choose your system for staying organized.

Then, bring students into the routine.

Finally, add on to your PBL goals.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode on classtechtips.com/podcast including all of the ways to connect with Erin and Ross!

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powerful fluency app can help students practice reading skills and give you actionable formative assessment data, too. Learn more at <https://aka.ms/ReadingProgressPP>

Outro

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Episode Resources

- Check out Erin Murphy and Ross Cooper's [website](#) and [new PBL book](#)
- Connect with [Erin Murphy](#) and [Ross Cooper](#) on Twitter
- [Schoolology](#) (K-12 learning management system)
- [Canvas](#) (Learning management system)
- [OneNote](#)
- [Google Classroom](#)
- [Online Project-Based Learning for Classrooms & Distance Learning](#) (Blog Post)
- [How to Integrate Project-Based STEM Challenges into Your Teaching](#) (Blog Post)
- [6 Creative Tools for Project-Based Learning](#) (Blog Post)
- [Tips for Project-Based Learning in Elementary & Middle School](#) (Blog Post)
- [Defined STEM Project-Based Learning Tasks](#) (Blog Post)
- [Project-Based Learning Activities with Project Pals](#) (Blog Post)
- [Digital Tips for Quick and Thoughtful Peer Feedback](#) (Podcast Episode)
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