

Project planning in secondary school: an introduction

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This article is the result of some research done in order to respond to the demands of ESB teachers who, faced with the need of having to do project planning, expressed their concern about the little training they had had in this kind of planning. By making it public I hope it will be useful for other teachers working at the same level who might share this concern or any other person interested in the topic.

First, I will make reference to some characteristics of project planning which will lead to project planning in our classrooms specifically. Then, we will have a look at the different steps in the planning of projects as indicated in the curriculum design for ESB. Finally, some suggestions will be made as to how to integrate the contents indicated in the curriculum design into different projects.

One of the most quoted authors for project planning are Ezequiel Ander-Egg and María José Aguilar. In their book *Cómo elaborar un proyecto* (1996), they define “project” as a series of interrelated tasks aiming at producing certain goods or services in order to meet needs or solve problems within a given budget and time limit. Even though this is a foundational book, the definition aims at social or cultural projects and most of it does not totally apply to classroom projects. Sánchez Iniesta (1995) goes a little bit beyond this when he states that a project is a way of organising the teaching/learning process by approaching the study of a problematic question. Project planning fosters the elaboration of an answer to the questions posed by students concerning real-life issues and their own interests. This enhances motivation, contextualises learning and makes it functional and applicable to situations different from classwork.

There are several occasions on which project work comes up: when there is a certain event in class or in the school, when students ask for a project out of their own interest in some topic, when news makes the media, when a special date is drawing near or at staff meetings when teachers work together to come up with some ideas for interdisciplinarian work. But once the project has been planned, and in order for this to be truly meaningful, teachers should involve their students in the work. As regards this, there are three ways of involvement: *spontaneous* (the students agree on a topic and organise themselves in a convenient way), *induced* (the teacher “suggests” that students should work on a project) or *compulsory* (projects are imposed on the students). The nature of our students and their teaching context will determine the kind of involvement each one of us will be able to get.

What are some of the advantages of project planning for our classrooms? Bixio (1996) and Palladino (1997) make different considerations that can be summarised as follows:

- There are no time constraints for project work. The time for each project will depend on its own design, though a three-month period seems to be the most acceptable limit before students begin to get bored.
- Project planning is versatile. There are hardly any fixed elements in its design.
- Project planning fosters joint activities by providing a realistic context to integrate disciplines and therefore making students think of project work in terms of problems to be solved rather than as discipline-related tasks.
- Since there is usually no material on projects, students are forced to work more to carry it out. Therefore the teacher’s role is re-defined as one of collaboration with and guidance of the students. Besides, by planning different projects it is not necessary to stick to one single textbook: more realistic materials can be used.

- Project work provides better opportunities for meaningful learning.

So, before continuing with project work itself, let us recap on some concepts related to another key issue in project planning: meaningful learning. According to Starico de Accomo (1999), in project work there is a bias towards learning related to experiences, facts and objects which links prior knowledge to the new material through affective implications. The associations between these are not just memorised but solidly built upon meaning. Memory is just operational, necessary to found learning on. The construction of new meanings leads to learning accompanied by personal growth. Thus, meaningful learning is of great influence on the students' cognitive structure and helps them transfer the new learning to new situations or problems to solve them autonomously. This kind of learning triggers internal processes which will inter-relate the new contents and promote long-lasting learning. Another characteristic of meaningful learning is that it promotes creativity and supposes permanent change leading to an open attitude towards reality.

As regards the steps to be followed, Bixio suggests the following ones:

DESIGN	EXECUTION
<p>Discussion and narrowing down of the topic: in this first step a topic should be found to be easy to approach in a not too long period of time.</p> <p>Statement: the transformation of the topic into a problem.</p> <p>Aims (the general changes that a programme seeks to bring about) and objectives (the specific changes, the learning outcomes and the instructional / teaching objectives, consistent with the aims).</p> <p>Accounting for the project is vital, since the acceptance of the project depends on this. Here the project must be made explicit to the authorities.</p> <p>Framework: a description of the state of the art about the topic.</p> <p>Time schedule: just as the other steps, it should be clear from scratch.</p>	<p>Research for data: through observation, surveys, different documents or interviews of two kinds, open (with the interviewer present) or closed (freer from interviewer's control and more dependent on the interviewee).</p> <p>Analysis and construction of data through methods that can be quantitative (tables, charts, percentages, statistics) or qualitative (descriptions, search for common aspects, classification of data, categorisations)</p> <p>New problems arising from the work done.</p> <p>Final conclusion and Proposal set forth in terms of real-life and easy to carry out.</p>
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<p>Not always in charge of the students. However, it might be a good exercise to let them give it a try so that they can have mechanical typing practice and they can learn about text processors and text format and conventions</p>	

How can project work help us in the teaching of the contents specified for secondary school? The answer is simple: it lets us weave these contents into the class work in different ways.

Many times, teachers complain that the contents they are expected to teach are too high for the students they have. Leaving prejudice behind, project work can assist them in their teaching. First of all, it should be remembered that the contents in English are always revised and recycled. Secondly, there is no mention made of the depth to be reached in the teaching of these contents or what skills should be given more importance. Thirdly, the different traditional ways in which these contents are taught should be revised in favour a

new approach that will be innovative. All this gives us the chance to make the best of our teaching provided we follow some guidelines.

The CD (curriculum design) suggests some contents to be taught. Those contents are basic and mandatory, but nowhere does it say that the contents of the previous year should be left aside. On the contrary, even though the CD does not make this explicit, every course should include, revise and go deeper into the contents of the previous year. Although the contents in the CD must be taught, those already seen must be revised, but this does not mean that the whole year must be devoted to revision as it seems to be the case in secondary school classrooms nowadays.

Now then, many teachers say that it is impossible to cope with the contents for one course, let alone including the contents of the previous year. This is the point when teachers can take advantage of the fact that no mention is made of the depth of the contents or the skills to be worked upon. In a more basic course, say 1st ES, students can work with stories by reading and listening to them and analysing them later, even if they have not worked the tenses from a grammatical point of view. Then, the following year, they can revise the topic by, for example, editing stories or corroborating or rectifying information, or by creating new versions of stories or fragments of stories given, or using texts as models for different creative kinds of work that might include writing alternative endings or adding more information, even if it means one sentence or two. At this point, they might even transform a written story in an oral story by “broadcasting” the story in a make-believe radio programme, puppet play or theatrical play. In the next course, they might start writing a story from scratch, provided they are given the necessary training in creative writing. So, by working in this fashion, students will incorporate the contents gradually into their class experience and make the best of the lessons.

Now, all this, many may say, sounds nice and perfect in theory but cannot be taken to the real practice. Can it not? Possibly, the issue is related to teaching methods. A new CD requires new strategies, a new approach, a completely different attitude towards teaching. Project work methodology can be very useful when it comes to exploring new aspects of teaching. Contents are not the only aspect to be revised in this new paradigm. So are methodologies. A new perspective on teaching cannot be expected to be successful if the actors involved in it do not conform to its requirements. If our previous teaching practice has not been successful, let us not try to apply it in our new contexts. The time has come to innovate, and innovations require strength and determination, a strong conviction that everything can be transformed little by little. The suggestion is not that we should leave behind everything we are accustomed to doing; many things are effective and they still will be in the new paradigm. The challenge is to take up new approaches and put them to the test: nothing can be criticised until it is actually put into practice and assessed objectively. Practice makes perfect, you can only move on by moving on, so hit the road!

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