Smooth Project Management with Dynamic Project Walls, and a Rubric! by Ian Stevenson, M.Ed.

A major component of PBL is that students learn how to take responsibility for their own learning. Shifting that responsibility away from the teacher to the student is one of the most challenging aspects of PBL. Our jobs are to help students learn and it is so easy to step in and give information, answers, and explanations. We do this out of care and concern. However it also does our students a disservice. They learn to rely on us for the answer, next steps, and information.

Project management is a dance between teacher guidance and student ownership. Sometimes it is well choreographed, sometimes we are make it up on the spot, and sometimes our feet get tangled and we fall to the floor. A powerful tool to help choreograph your project management is a well developed Project Wall. See excellent examples from K. Smith Elementary School in San Jose, that helped inspire this blog post!

You probably already have some sort of project wall - hooray! But a little Reflection and Revision goes a long way. Smooth project management relies on the smooth flow of information. Providing as much information as possible gives students the opportunity to get the information themselves, what I like to call the "Self-Service classroom". Is your wall supporting the flow of information as much as possible? Use the 8 Elements of PBL and the Project Wall Rubric as your guide.

1. Signficant Content: Does your wall clearly indicate what content the students will learn? It should. The list of significant content should flow naturally from the Need to Know conversation at the launch of the project. This is also a flexible list, you can add to it as you review your Need to Knows throughout the project. Students indicating that they are learning MORE than you thought - how awesome is that!? This is also the place to translate the teacher-talk of standards into manageable student-talk. If it is a high school class go ahead and use the standards language, it is excellent practice of academic vocabulary.

2. 21st Century Skills: Does your wall clearly indicate what skills the students will be learning and practicing? It should. Students need reminders of what the heck they are doing and why. This is especially true for students new to the PBL process. Include pictures, examples, conversation/question stems, and rubrics that remind the student of what the skill is, help them learn the skill, and know if they are doing it well.

3. The Driving Question: This is a no-brainer! It is driving the whole project so it must be large and in-charge! There are countless times when I point to the DQ, or run over to the wall and ask students "how does what you just did help you answer the DQ?". This helps keep the student inquiry and work time flowing in appropriate directions, which is the main goal of project management. If you refer to the DQ and make reference to its physical presence in the room,

your students WILL start referring to it themselves. I love it when during a Socratic Seminar or 3-Way Debate I see students glancing to the project wall and the DQ! I know I have done my job well.

4. Need to Know (NTK): Is the student voice of what they need to learn visible? The NTK goes hand-in-hand with the DQ. It not a static, unchanging list to be forgotten during the heart of the project. The NTK list needs to be constantly revisited, revised, and growing. The list should be reviewed for each scaffold activity that the class moves into and out of. This checkpoint reinforces the purpose of their time and helps keep the teenage brain more focused. Use it for powerful formative assessment - students need to explain how their learning aligns with the NTK's and helped answer the DQ.

5. Voice and Choice: Mmm. This element is not so obvious to have on a project wall. Here are some suggestions. On the NTK list you could indicate what student added that element to the list. List the teams and the specific project focus, topic, and product that each team is taking on. Have a 'parking-lot' where students can write questions on sticky notes (you can use these as discussion starters, or respond to the student/team appropriately). Seeing themselves on the board in a public way helps to build the relationship of trust. And it indicates that you value what they have to say. The more that students feel their voice is valued the more they are willing to take ownership of their own learning.

6.In-depth Inquiry: Does your wall show the progression of inquiry and learning in the project? To support the cycle of inquiry valuable information applicable to the project needs to be visible. Calendars and rubrics support the independent thinking and planning inherent in effective student project management. Have a pre-made poster with directions for various student-centered learning strategies and hang the appropriate one with any accompanying sentence starters and question stems (see facinghistory.org/teaching-strategies for a list of excellent learning strategies). Also make sure you post as many resources - paper and digital - as possible, be sure to include sources that students find as well.

7. Revision and Reflection: Where does your wall show evidence of revision? This element can be supported through your continual referral to the Driving Question and NTK list. The NTK list should be a living document with items getting crossed out as students learn answers to specific questions, and items getting added as their answers lead to more questions. In the "Spotlight on Awesomeness" section in my Project Walls I post student work that clearly shows heavy revision marks, and the student's reflection of how the revision made their work better. It tends to get messy, but that is ok, have you seen a teenager's room? They can live with messy!

8. Authentic public audience: Can a visitor to your room get an in-depth understanding of the project without even talking to you, or students? They should be able to know what the project products will be, when and how they are being presented. Progression of student learning should be visible. And best of all, they should be able to ask any student in the room to explain something on the wall, and get clear accurate answers. The wall puts YOUR hard work on display so use it for your own teacher assessment process - it contains evidence of a supportive

learning environment, differentiated learning opportunities, and your ability to plan rigorous "units" for student learning of content and skills.

Wow! Don't get overwhelmed if your wall does not have all of this. Just like with your students, you want to see improvement in your own work as time goes by. Pick one item that you will add to your wall in your next project. As your students get more experienced in project work, much of your work changes, and keeping the project wall current is one part of that.

Start using your project wall as a powerful management tool that is dynamic, raises student ownership of learning, and helps the flow of information which is at the heart of smooth project management. How has the project wall helped your students and project management? Please share below or on twitter at @istevenson75

BIG thanks to The K.Smith School for sharing their hard work, and Patrick Shaw at OCM BOCES for the awesome Project Wall Rubric!