Chapter 23
The Making of Adult Learners through Project–Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Different learning theories including action learning, experiential learning, and project-based learning have been used in adult learning, which usually takes place in community colleges. Since 2000, Hong Kong universities have established their own community college to provide a second chance for individuals to further studies in universities or gain work skills to facilitate their return to the society. Among all approaches, project-based learning is the most popular approach in English language learning in community colleges because the traditional teaching methods did not work well on passive and dependent Chinese students. This chapter discusses the features of project-based language learning and then examines the language students' perceptions towards project-based learning so as to better the program design. The findings show that students have developed reading, writing, and research skills through group projects, and the language teacher, feedback, and collaboration are vital to the success of project-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

In traditional Hong Kong classrooms, students are used to rely on the teacher to transmit them knowledge and organize their learning objectives because of the effect of the public examinations (i.e., Hong Kong Certificate Examination, Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination) which are a screening system to higher and tertiary education. Whether students can further study in the university is badly affected by the

result of the examinations and thus students are trained to learn for the examination but not for the pedagogical purpose. Bao and Lam (2008) also found that freedom of choice was less important if Chinese students felt attached to the teachers who made choices for them. Gradually, students have become passive, dependent, and de-motivated to learn independently.

To enable passive and dependent students to face the new changes in the millennium, the Education Bureau (which is formerly called Education and Manpower Bureau) issued a series of reform proposals in 2000 helping students become an independent and life-long learner based on the recommendation of the Education Commission

(EC) in 'Learning for Life, Learning through life'. This report, which has become the education blueprint for the 21ˢᵗ Century in Hong Kong, states that the overall aims of education in Hong Kong should be 'to enable every person to attain all-round development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics according to his / her own attributes so that he / she is capable of life-long learning, critical and exploratory thinking, innovating and adapting to change; filled with self-confidence and a team spirit' (EC, 2000, p. 4).

In response to the Education Commission's proposals, the Curriculum Development Council issued 'Learning to Learn – The Way Forward in Curriculum Development' in 2001 to set out the directions for educational reforms. It recommends that the priority of the education reform was 'to enable our students to enjoy learning, enhance their effectiveness in communication and develop their creativity and sense of commitment' (EC, 2000, p. 4) and explicates that 'well-planned project-based learning has a positive effect on the development of life-long learning capabilities' (CDC, 2002, p. 103). Project learning has also been considered to be one of the four key tasks to enhance students' independent learning capabilities, and regarded as a powerful learning and teaching strategy to promote 'self-directed, self-regulated and self-reflecting' learning (CDC, 2001, p. 87). It also helps students acquire and construct knowledge, and develop various important generic skills through a variety of learning experiences (CDC, 2001, p. viii).

Since these educational documents have advocated a new approach to teaching and learning which is considered more effective than the traditional teaching approach, teachers and educators have turned to project-based learning to realize the goals of the educational reforms. Since 2001, it has been widely used in some interdisciplinary subjects in Hong Kong so as to help develop students' generic skills, integrate and apply their knowledge within and across key learning areas.

While project-based learning is highly praised for its value in secondary schools, it is also essential to investigate students' perceptions of project-based learning under the context of Hong Kong community colleges, which provide various self-financing local programs. As students are the major participants in the program, their perceptions towards project-based learning provide valuable data to better the program design and teaching/learning approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review starts with meaning and purpose of project-based learning put forward by various educators. The next section examines the benefits of using project-based learning as an alternative learning approach. Lastly, an overview of research in project work internationally and in local universities is discussed to provide the research grounding and justification for this study.

Meaning of Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is an instructional approach advocated by Dewey (1938), who emphasized the importance of practical experience in learning. Unlike traditional, teacher-led approach, it also emphasizes long-term, collaborative, interdisciplinary and student-centered learning activities in which students often must organize their own work and manage their own time in a project-based class.

Nevertheless, some educators have more subtle definitions of project-based learning. For instance, Katz and Chard (2000), Solomon (2003) and Wolk (1994) regard project-based learning as a learning approach to foster experiential learning through group work whereas Newell (2003), Simkins (1999) and Steinberg (1998) view it as a teaching method to transfer knowledge and skills to students through authentic issues.

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