

Features

Project learning is being adopted by many Hong Kong schools because it promotes independent thinking outside the classroom, but experts say the objectives have to be clearly defined, writes *Amanda Watson*

An alternative approach for a new century

THIS WAS THE FIRST time we've really learned how to co-operate and help each other. We also learnt a lot about how to get information. It was so different from what we do in the classroom. Much more fun."

Leung Pak-hong is smiling as he talks about the recent trip to Yun-nan he and four schoolmates made to study the culture of the area. Work included interviews and questionnaires.

It is a typical project for children at Po Leung Kuk 1983 Board of Directors College, a welcome departure from normal lessons. The college was one of the first in Hong Kong to introduce project learning, group work that can encompass just about any part of the curriculum, and which is now being adopted by local schools.

It is a key plank of the government's education reforms, beginning at primary level and ending with liberal studies at senior secondary. Its intention is to create dynamic workers for tomorrow, happy to work in teams and able to solve complex problems creatively, and it has many virtues for students and educators.

"Learning in the new century has changed," said one of the college's teachers, Tong Wun-leung. "The old way was just too boring. Projects mean the students become more self-motivated. We support them, but it is up to them how they do the project. Not all teachers are expert in everything, so you become a facilitator. You learn the subject in a different way yourself. Your role has changed."

Topics on offer at the school illustrate the diversity of project learning. Following Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) guidelines, they might include "At the

Cinema" - involving mapping the layout of a cinema and using English to describe it - "Design a Two-Day Trip in Hong Kong for Your Family", "Study of a Popular Western Band/Singer", "The Best Food Court" or "Rust Prevention Methods at Home and in School".

Project learning, whatever the subject, has been embraced ardently by principal Hui Wing-ho. "Students are mastering the generic skills of learning through this," he said. "They learn how to retrieve information and organise data. That is a whole new set of learning skills for the modern world."

The school became a project pioneer when previous principal Isaac Tse Pak-hoi was a member of an EMB advisory committee on the subject and acted quickly to start it within his own school in 1995.

One of the main advantages the school has found, according to Mr Hui, is that it significantly contributes to a higher standard of learning. "Students know when they join this school that they must spend a minimum amount of time on research. No matter how low the standards of individual students are, each year they learn a new set of learning skills which will help them to survive in a new world."

Teachers benefited from the unity created by projects that ran across the whole school. "It opens teachers' eyes. Teachers usually think of specialising only in their subject. Now those boundaries have changed. Project learning is multi-disciplinary. It's dull to do the same lessons every day, and projects give teachers a change of atmosphere."

But not all teachers are so enthusiastic. Po Leung Kuk teacher Lam Pui-wing said he did not like

"one-off projects" which he felt were irrelevant. Also, he wanted to see follow-up projects to find out whether students changed their ideas. "One or two projects would be OK, but I'm opposed to so many. There should also be more of a central theme to them," he said.

Students should have a clear understanding of what they were doing. "They need more basic skills for that. And they need to learn to respect and understand other cultures. I wish they could open up and look beyond Asia," he said.

Chris Wardlaw, deputy secretary for education and manpower, said projects had to be carefully planned if they were to result in effective learning. Much work was being done within the EMB to give a structure to the project learning concept. "The learning objectives have to be clear. They have to involve higher-order thinking."

That view is shared by Dr Diane Phillips, educationalist and author, who was in Hong Kong recently to extol the virtues of project learning through a series of workshops for the ELT Network, a group set up by the British Council just over a year ago to promote professional development and an exchange of ideas among SAR teachers.

Dr Phillips is co-author of a new Oxford University Press book, *Projects for Young Learners*, written with Sarah Burwood and Helen Dunford, which covers planning, organising and carrying out projects for learners aged between five and 13. The book combines language development with activities that challenge young learners and motivate them to be independent.

"The teacher's role in all this is to plan the project," said Dr Phillips. "This includes the learning out-



HELPING HAND: Teacher Jessica Cheung Wing-yee leads 1983 Board of Director's College pupils volunteering to serve the elderly. Photo: Edward Wong

comes, co-ordinating and encouraging the children and assessing the work of the group and individuals."

For those looking at creating a successful project, the answer lies in basing it on topics children were interested in and involved them as much as possible so that their ideas and interests were included, she added. The key was that good projects should be short and simple but with an "end-product" that children could show off.

"The end product has got to have the children's input - it's not the teacher telling them what to do for a change. And it should integrate skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening," said Dr Phillips, a teacher of English for 25 years, who is also a lecturer for the Open University and an Inspector for the British Council in Britain.

"It's partly a matter of making the children aware of what they've achieved, what they're doing, so that it's not just another page in the course book going on and on, week after week, year after year. There's going to be a point at which children can look back at what they've done and list their achievements in terms of what they've produced and the language they've learned."

That goes along very much with the new ideas of portfolio assessment, where the children and the teachers can write a list of the things that the children can do, that they have practised in the project and that they have something to show as evidence," she said.

To an audience of mostly local teachers at the workshops, Dr Phillips advocated a cross-discipline approach, making English learning part of a general education.

"English has got to be about something. You can't talk about language skills in a vacuum. It's got to have content. And why not use content which links in with what the children are learning in their other classes at school?"

She said a project was something that most teachers could incorporate into the normal syllabus, usually based on a course book.

ing a short project to start with, probably in parallel with the work from the course book, she advised.

This joint push to get students to learn new ways of learning and to help teachers deepen their understanding was behind the EMB's promotion of project learning as one of its key strategies for the new century, according to Stephen Yip Yam-wing, EMB chief curriculum development officer (life-wide learning).

"We want to help teachers realise there are other ways of teaching, and this way encourages students

always think about their own marks. Hong Kong has been very didactic, teacher-centred, and heavily content-based. So project learning is very important, we feel, in changing that."

He said that projects could not be started at Primary One or Two stage, adding: "But you can break it down into small pieces, perhaps pair learning, or teach how to present data in, say, bar charts. These are very basic building blocks. But we always advise our schools not to go in haste, not to bombard students with a project with no support."

By junior secondary, students knew how to find lots of information. The problem was that they wanted to cover the whole world. "So then we need to teach them information literacy so they know to select the right information to build up their arguments," he said.

In the new senior secondary curriculum, liberal studies focused on how to make an inquiry, especially a cross-subject one.

"Teachers are finding their best projects are cross-curricula, and we'd like to see more of that," Mr Yip said.

"It's all about learning communities, so teachers are very much involved and they learn in the process too. They learn about individual learning styles, new information and, best of all, they are starting to talk to other departments within and outside their schools to collaborate, because they need to know more."

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Stephen Yip Yam-wing
Education and Manpower Bureau

"I wouldn't necessarily advocate that they ditch the course book, ditch the syllabus and make their own syllabus by doing a series of projects. That's asking too much of teachers, who don't really have time to make sure all the work is being done based around project work."

Instead, it was possible to apply the principles of a project and try wherever possible to link it to the strong assessment culture, students were very individualistic and



INDEPENDENT THINKING: Students of Po Leung Kuk 1983 Board of Director's College at the Tsing Yi discuss their project learning task. From left: Liu Holman, Wong Men-wei and Chong Ka-hei. Photo: Edward Wong

THE LIST

SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

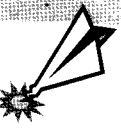
File Markets German Swiss International School. Covered playground. Tomorrow, 11am-2pm.
Parenting Seminar Series organised by Early Years Network. On children's discipline and behaviour. PolyU. Today and next Saturday, 1.30pm-4.30pm. Tel 2992 6181 or visit www.Early-Years-Network.com
Sharks Can Teach by children's literature specialist Diane Frankenstein. From Left: Liu Holman, Wong Men-wei and Chong Ka-hei. Photo: Edward Wong

6.30pm-9.30pm, for five weeks. ESU members, students \$1,000, others \$1,200. Tel 2186 8449 or e-mail: esuhk@netvigator.com
Beyond the Numbers - Financial Strategies for Non-Financial Managers Richard hay School of Business. Professor Steve Forster. Thursday and Friday, Tel Kennis Fung at 2135 2255, e-mail: kfung@wey.com.hk or visit www.wey.com.hk
IBSA Information Seminar - HK PolyU's Graduate School of Business (GSSB Rm N001). On campus, next Saturday, February 26, 2.30pm-4pm. Tel 2766 7087.

EXHIBITIONS AND OTHER EVENTS

SCMP

專題研習組曲 2004-05



保良局八三年總理中學舉辦

專題研習展具趣味

保良局八三年總理中學月前舉辦「專題研習展續紛日」，是一次全校參與的大型匯報。中一至中五同學分組完成專題研習後並展示學習成果和研習能力，邀請了大學講師、家長、校友和中大級同學任評判。中一級同學則當小記者，記錄報道當天的活動。

早在一九九四至九五年度，該校已成為專題研習學校之一。十年來的教學發展，同學已掌握了專題研習的技巧，在匯報時充滿自信。同學們表示，在研習過程中提高了溝通、協作和自我管理等能力，很有收穫。

參與活動的友校中小學生，也受到同學們的感染，留心聽取匯報；友校老師及教統局的同工也到校觀摩。經過在上午的匯報，優勝者們進入下午舉行的決賽，並分享學習收穫。

決賽中，以測試人體反應實驗的小組勇奪冠軍。他們的習作以大膽假設、反覆推論，小心求證而得到評審團及同學們的認同；這種結合理論和實踐的學習方式，對同學們是一項挑戰，同學們更爲了翌日的匯報而緊張得徹夜難眠。亞軍的

作品是製作音樂電影。從劇本、台詞、製作均是親手炮製，他們更邀得學校工友充當臨時演員，令電影表達更爲充實。

評審團在總結中，認為同學們的習作口頭匯報時仍有改善和進步的空間。同學們表示，這樣的溝通有助於他們擴闊眼界，在學習上也有所進益。大部分人都認同這次專題研習是近年來同類活動中最有意義和具趣味的。



大公報

展望未來

李丁亮副校長

為進一步增強同學對研究题目的擁有感，校方將 2004/2005 年度全面讓同學自行擬定題目，老師只以導師身份給予同學意見，而不再建議的專題讓同學選取研究。同學分組及自擬题目的時間將於 2005 年 5 月進行。

此外，2005 專題匯報日將安排於學校的開放日進行，以學習作為慶祝學校新翼落成及校慶的主要活動。

士大夫三日不讀書，便覺語言乏味，面目可憎。

—— 黃庭堅