

TEPT Course Epiphany

Tanja Milunović, Primary School *Dragan Lukić*, Belgrade, Serbia

English Teacher Professional Development Distance Learning Program supported by University of Oregon and Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State

Keywords: e-teacher scholarship, professional development, teaching teenagers, learner independence, TEPT, millennials, ABCD objective, PBL

Introduction

Having obtained your college degree in Serbia almost never means that you are capable of being a teacher. What is more, years are to come before you excel your teaching abilities. Isaac Asimov once said: "Self-education is, I firmly believe, the only kind of education there is". Ever since I have read this, I have been searching for ways to improve my skills and educate myself to provide my students with the opportunity to look up to me and teach them to do the same by becoming independent learners.

Nowadays, more than ever, knowledge is just a click away from us, and teachers shouldn't miss the opportunity to explore the whole world abundant in successful practices from the comfort of their own home. The E-Teacher Scholarship Program is just one among many eye-opening courses created for foreign English language professionals (for program's eligibility and application [overview](http://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/e-teacher-scholarship-program) visit <http://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/e-teacher-scholarship-program>). I have been nominated to enroll in the TEPT (Teaching English to Pre-teens and Teens) course this spring that trains teachers on how to approach millennials through the student-centered approach and collaborative Project Based Learning (PBL) that enable them to become independent learners.

This 10-week blend of theoretical and practical work has been entirely conducted via the Blackboard educational online platform and has indeed been an epiphany for me. The course is Pass/No Pass, and your final score has to be at least 70% in order to receive the Certificate of Completion. Each week you are given reading assignments and two deadlines per week to submit your written work on the provided topics. At the same time, you have to go through the work of your fellow participants and contribute by giving analytical and critical feedback. Both stages should be supported with examples from your own teaching experience. You are advised

to dedicate about 10 hours per week to the reading assignments, but quite often you will need more than that.

Course Scope and Sequence

Week 1: Orientation to Blackboard. Understanding & teaching Generation Y. Project work.

Week 2: Team-building. Project-based learning essentials.

Week 3: Twenty-first century learning environments. Evaluate published projects.

Week 4: Teaching speaking & listening. Lesson planning with goals & objectives.

Week 5: Assessment & evaluation. Evaluate published projects.

Week 6: Error correction & feedback. Mid term check of the final project.

Week 7: Teaching reading & writing. Evaluate published projects.

Week 8: Teaching grammar & vocabulary. Use of music & games.

Week 9: Learning styles & multiple intelligences.

Week 10: Final week of the course! Wrap up in Discussion and submit the final project

I will try to summarize this 10-week learning experience by highlighting three most important factors for the successful teaching practice – Millennials and their characteristics, PBL and ABCD Objectives.

Millenials

A significant asset of the course is its in-depth analysis on how to know your students better. Once the only source of knowledge - teacher as a "sage on the stage" - is now being placed among the wide range of sources. The mind-set of the new generations, commonly referred to as Millennials or Gen Y, craves for independence and alternative strategies for learning. These students are tech-savvy, kinaesthetic and visual learners who seek customized, entertaining and relevant tasks along with the instant and constant feedback.

Having this in mind, it is obvious that the above-mentioned role of teacher and Comenius's educational system have to undergo significant changes if we are to nurture meaningful learning values and avoid lack of interest in our students. The teacher is to be a mediator and guide more than a preacher, and teacher-centred approach is being replaced with the student-centred

one. It is difficult to alter the whole system, but what we can certainly do is to bear in mind characteristics of our students and at least try to give them the access to meaningful, relevant, entertaining and long-lasting learning and opportunities to become more independent through projects.

Project Based Learning

Projects are what enable students to activate their knowledge and apply it without being dependent on their teacher. However, not all projects are beneficial, and not all projects can provide long-lasting and functional skills. The common practice is to assign the student a task of presenting a certain topic. Some learners indulge themselves in thorough research. Others paste Wikipedia lines, and all together create a poster or PowerPoint Presentation about the topic, but none of them sees the purpose in it, apart from getting the grade.

Projects are more than that. What I realized during the course and after observing several examples of successfully completed projects is that they should live long after the completion of their presentation. They can even change lives (e.g. ecology-related topics where students research, collect data, propose solutions, present in front of the school and community members, upload them online, raise awareness and even finding funds to achieve their goals of improving their community or school, take pride in their actions ever after and influence others).

There are **eight essential steps that insure effective Project Based Learning**:

1. Significant content. Planning a project means finding significant content in terms of students' own lives and interests. Basically, you are to think locally before you move on thinking globally.

2. A Need to Know. In order to achieve this in students, the teacher should awaken their curiosity with a topic-related "entry event" (e.g. a video, picture, discussion, dialogue, recent event, etc.) that will make them want to find out more about the issue and engage themselves in the matter.

3. A Driving Question. This is the heart of the project that captures the purpose of the PBL itself. It should be thought-provocative, open-ended and problem/ solving. A printable tool known as *Tubric* might help you while developing this step https://sites.udel.edu/sfi2015/files/2015/02/FreeBIE_Tubric-zq93r6.pdf.

4. Student Voice and Choice. The teacher could be a guide providing resources and a list of ideas, and students will choose, modify, if necessary, and create a product of their own choice.

5. 21st Century Skills. It is immensely important for the students to activate collaboration, communication, critical thinking and the use of technology so that they would keep up the pace with the modern and contemporary world outside the classroom.

6. Inquiry and Innovation. This is a step students are to undertake in order to find out more about the task and reach a conclusion and find a solution of their own.

7. Feedback and Revision. The teacher should provide students with the regular comments on their progress so that they could proceed with the project as intended.

8. Publicly Presented Project. This stage highlights the importance of their work and inviting family, friends, teachers, representatives of the community and even business and government representatives helps students take the task seriously and try their best.

ABCD Objectives

This is probably the most valuable revelation of the course that is applicable and desirable in all teaching contexts and during the entire teaching practice. Having an ABCD objective for each lesson and even each activity, helps both students and teachers to focus, comprehend, do and evaluate the task.

AUDIENCE (*Who are your learners?*): The beginner students

BEHAVIOUR (*What do you want them to do?*): will be able to classify words into 3 categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives)

CONDITION (*What will you provide for them to do the task?*): given the instruction, words on the board and handout with the examples

DEGREE (*How will you assess their product?*): with 90% accuracy.

This would be just an example of the ABCD model for the single activity, but following the same principle the model is applicable to the whole lesson or project (e.g. **Audience**: The intermediate students **Behaviour**: will be able to present solutions for improving the park in front

of the audience **Condition:** having seen and photographed the current state of it **Degree:** by proposing at least 5 doable ways for improvement).

Conclusion

Having been a devoted and eager learner, I have managed to obtain the TEPT course Certificate of Completion with the highest score, but as already mentioned at the beginning of the article this only means I have yet to learn and apply gained knowledge in the practice. In the time being, I will keep on implementing these three steps that lead towards meaningful and relevant teaching practice. PBL equips our students with the skills that enable them to be become independent learners and educate themselves, as Asimov pointed out. Knowing your students is crucial if we are to engage them in the PBL and project along each activity should be focused through ABCD objectives.

References:

- Larmer, J. and Mergendoller J. 2012 *8 Essentials for Project-Based Learning*. Buck Institute, ASCD
- Reilly, P. 2012 *Understanding and Teaching Generation Y*. English Teaching Forum, Volume 50, Number 1
- Smaldino, S.E., Lowther, D.L., and Russell, J.D. 2012 *Instructional technology and media for learning (10th ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice Hall.



Tanja Milunović has graduated from the Faculty of Philology and Arts at the University of Kragujevac and gained her MA in 2011. Pursuit of knowledge and contagious geeky enthusiasm are traits she wants to awaken in students. Currently, she is working in the primary school “Dragan Lukić” in Belgrade and at The English Access Microscholarship Program, and she is having a whale of time.