

[Review] Project Work by Diana L. Fried-Booth,
Project-Based Learning: A Learner-Centered
Activity Workbook by Steven Rudolph, Teaching
Through Projects by Jane Henry

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Project Work. Diana L. Fried-Booth. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Pp. 89. ¥2900 ISBN 0-19-437092-5

Project-Based Learning: A Learner-centered Activity Workbook. Steven Rudolph. Tokyo: Newbury House, 1994. Pp. 40. ¥1800 ISBN 4-931321-00-3

Teaching Through Projects. Jane Henry. London: Kogan Page Limited, 1994. Pp.160. £14.95 ISBN 0-7494-0846-4

In second language (L2) instruction, experience has shown that curricula designed around project work (as compared to, for example, grammatical or structural based curricula) can provide a unique opportunity for students simultaneously to take responsibility for their learning, be motivated by the need to discover, and use language communicatively and purposefully. These characteristics are considered valuable in creating an effective L2 learning climate, but are often difficult to generate in traditional teacher-centered, fixed-curriculum classrooms. However, because poorly planned projects can burgeon out of control, take too much time, or present other unforeseen difficulties, many teachers are reluctant to commit to them. Also, because projects tend to shift the classroom focus away from the teacher, some teachers fear they may lose control of both the students and the course content.

Sensitive to these concerns, Diana Fried-Booth's text *Project Work* offers both new and experienced L2 English teachers a short and encouraging rationale for using projects as well as practical examples of each stage of designing and implementing a project. Separate chapters, each with useful charts, checklists, and worksheets, illustrate how to break down complex linguistic and research tasks. What is evident, but not made particularly explicit, is the need for both teacher (as facilitator) and students to think through tasks carefully and methodically to understand their component parts in order to be able to achieve the final project goal.

On the whole, this is a very practical text with numerous case studies and examples to inspire courage and creativity and even to use 'as is' if necessary. Surely this is one reason why it has become one of the standard resources for L2 project work, having gone through five new printings since first being published in 1986. In addition, and something which is not seen in other texts, is the author's awareness that L2 projects (in English) can be carried out in non-English speaking communities and in classes where open or cooperative practices are new to both teacher and students. Bridging activities are suggested to aid students in accepting a more autonomous role in their learning and to let them gain confidence in using language authentically. With a view to stimulating teacher imagination, Fried-Booth provides numerous lists for where to search for authentic English. In addition to commonly referred-to places like train stations and major hotels, other suggestions include art galleries, trade exhibitions, and international agencies (such as Oxfam) where interesting projects can be carried out despite the lack of a supporting immersion community.

The enthusiasm the author has for projects as a motivator to language learning may mislead some teachers into believing that they are easy to use or that planning is unimportant, and this is the book's weakest point. Insufficient guidance is given, for example, on how teachers burdened with fixed curricula and examinations can insert projects into their limited time. Nor is enough practical information given on what to do if things start to fall apart (e.g. students not participating equally, elements of the project turning out to be not doable, loss of interest midway through the project). Fortunately, however, as more teachers around the world have become

enthusiasts of project work, practical applications and suggestions have multiplied to supplement this early text.

One such example is Steven Rudolph's slim workbook, *Project-Based Learning: A Learner-Centered Activity Workbook*. The most interesting feature of this text is the immediate focus, in the first of three sections, on promoting language learning self-awareness and responsibility. Students fill in charts and a checklist so they will have a better idea of why they want or need to learn English, which skills are most important for them, and where they can find the English they need. In the second section, students are given hands-on tools for managing their project(s): a selection sheet, a time management chart, self-assessment cards, and worksheets for reporting work done and information learned. They choose their tasks, monitor their progress and, in so doing, reflect on their learning.

While the format is very much geared to the student, a teacher can also make good use of the way that tasks are graded for complexity, number of participants and probable duration. The tasks are generic—conducting an interview, holding a series of conversations, creating a brochure about a favorite travel destination—while the instructions are kept to a minimum: "Select a penpal. Write a letter and make a copy of it." Thus, until students feel comfortable with their independence, they will likely need considerable teacher supervision. This unformed type of exercise stretches the definition of project work and both student and teacher, if not careful, may lose sight of the independent nature of the activities.

A more challenging perspective generally on project work for L2 practitioners is that offered by Jane Henry in *Teaching Through Projects*. Unlike the preceding two workbooks, this volume focuses on the author's research on project work carried out by native English speakers enrolled in the Open University (UK) in a variety of academic disciplines. Of significance here is not only the fact that project work is discussed as an activity for native speakers of English, but, and perhaps more importantly, the focus is on projects which are completed at distance (i.e. without teacher and students sharing the same classroom).

After a background of and rationale for projects in a curriculum, the author moves step-by-step through the process of designing and implementing a project *from the point of view of an instructor*. Practical advice is given on such areas as topic selection, data collection, materials management, and communications with the student. The extensive basis of projects the author has studied (four thousand students on twenty project courses) allows her to give a very realistic assessment of the range of problems students and their supervisors encounter, and how to avoid these problems in the initial design or solve them during the project itself. Issues relating to assessment, necessary levels of support and attrition are discussed in a practical way.

This text is an indispensable companion for teachers contemplating major projects in their academic program. The format lends itself to easy reference: topics are outlined; checklists are given; charts are provided; and data are made clear and accessible. It would be a useful text in a TEFL teacher training course, regardless of the fact that the project participants studied were native speakers in their home country.

Since much of the study's original data were gathered at least a decade ago, little reference is made to utilizing computers (especially electronic mail) for communicating with students working away from their home campus. As a consequence, a major element of distance project management is not addressed, that of project supervision by a home campus even when students are dispersed around the globe carrying out their assignments. This type of distance education needs further study, especially as it may involve students using another language in a new and foreign culture with all the attendant stresses that implies.

As each of these three different texts shows, projects (whether locally- or distance-administered) shift classes away from the teacher as sole provider of information to a learner-based environment in which students take on greater responsibility for what they learn. As a result, students become more aware of why they are doing what they do and this, in turn, motivates continued learning. Since even relatively simple projects comprise a diversity of tasks, students are able to exercise their skills in a wide variety of authentic English language situations while exercising higher cognitive skills. As project work becomes more commonly used and sophisticated, it may well play a central role in the current evolution away from rote learning to critical analysis within the framework of second language acquisition.

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