

The Power of the 4Cs: The Foundation for Creating a Gold Standard for Project Based Learning (PBL)

by [Helen Soule](#) Executive Director Partnership for 21st Century Skills



Creating a gold-standard for Project Based Learning and then reaching that standard may seem to be a bit like scaling a mountain - at first glance-difficult, very risky, and somewhat mysterious. However, even the tallest mountains can be climbed if you have the right knowledge, skills, tools, and support—and perhaps a little courage. The same can be said for Project Based Learning.

Take a deep look at the essential elements of a gold standard PBL.

Standard of excellence cannot be achieved without the 4Cs (communication, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, and creativity and innovation). These skills are the springboards upon which the highest quality PBL is built; they are embedded in these essential elements; and they must be developed and nurtured in teachers and students alike to successfully reach this high standard.

At the heart of Project Based Learning is the educator -- who brings individual expertise, knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Transforming teaching practice through PBL can be incredibly rewarding, risky, and frustrating.

The very nature of **communication** changes with PBL. The language used is different, the processes and practices are different, and the relationship between teacher and student is different. New communication strategies and tactics must be employed in the PBL classroom, as the teacher becomes a guide, a facilitator, an enabler, a motivator, and a developer of learning experiences, rather than a lecturer, director, and source of all knowledge. The PBL teacher needs a toolbox full of questioning techniques to develop inquiry and curiosity, and new ways to clearly articulate the purpose and value of PBL to stakeholders, parents, and community members alike, for which this is new.

Critical thinking/problem solving continues to be a core component of PBL both as an end and a means. Teachers must internalize and model critical thinking, building it into the DNA of classroom practice. As Mergendoller points out, this takes intentionality, self-direction, and time. Through this process of development and incorporation into practice, a funny thing happens—critical thinking begins to affect everything, including how instruction is designed, and how one thinks through content for new projects.

The importance of **student collaboration** is widely acknowledged and appreciated in the worldwide PBL community. Building students' collaboration skills is a key component, and advantage, of Project Based Learning. Through collaborative experiences, students learn how to collectively plan, work towards a common goal, and recognize and navigate individual differences in skills, abilities, and attitudes. However, teacher collaboration also plays an essential role in the journey toward the highest quality PBL, providing needed peer support and encouragement for this transformation, which often accelerates capacity building. Teacher collaboration can take many forms, from formal professional learning networks, to mentorships and coaching, to informal groups of like-minded peers with common interests. Collaboration

occurs inside or outside the school, online, face-to-face, across the world, or across the hall. Collaboration on projects across disciplines strengthens the content, relevance and depth of the project, helping students connect the dots among their separate courses.

The incorporation of creativity and innovation skills in the gold standard PBL should not be overlooked. At the heart of Project Based Learning lies the opportunity for students and teachers to innovate, and to create new products, new learning, and even new ways of visualizing the world.

As the gold standard for PBL develops and evolves, we must be sure our educators have the essential knowledge, tools, support, and skills needed to achieve this goal.