

Project-Based Learning and Invitations: A Comparison

CHEU-JEY LEE, PH.D.

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

A FEW YEARS AGO, I WAS INVITED TO GIVE A BRIEF PRESENTATION ON LITERACY EDUCATION TO A PRINCIPALS' ADVISORY BOARD, which consisted of thirteen elementary and secondary principals. I began the presentation by asking, "How many of you have heard about critical literacy?"¹ Not surprisingly, only a couple of them raised their hands. Upon further inquiry, they appeared to have difficulty explaining what critical literacy was. After the presentation, I was approached by a principal who showed a great interest in critical literacy along with its learning approach – "invitations." The principal asked me about the possibility of giving a workshop on invitations to the teachers at her elementary school. I happily accepted her invitation. Approximately two months later, I received an email from the principal inquiring if I could still go to her school and do a workshop on project-based learning (PBL), a type of inquiry-based learning (more on this later). Yet, I only had a smattering of PBL at the time. I replied immediately and asked if she meant invitations instead of PBL. Finally, we came to realize that what she needed was PBL, but that she had confused it with invitations. Unfortunately, we ended up having no workshop, but this incident piqued my initial interest in PBL and made me wonder how it differed from invitations.

In fact, I had researched invitations and incorporated this learning approach into my courses in the teacher education program for years and thought I had a fairly good understanding of it. However, my understanding and practice of invitations were problematized after my interaction with the principal discussed above and subsequently challenged and revisited when I attended a three-day workshop on PBL. The workshop was provided as a professional development opportunity for the university faculty as well as P-12 teachers. The workshop began with an overview of PBL, followed by a series of hands-on activities, including collaboration in small groups on how to design and implement a PBL project. The more I learned about PBL, the more I could relate it to my teaching. Meanwhile, a sense of curiosity also arose as PBL seemed to resemble invitations in several respects.

Both PBL and invitations are related to inquiry-based learning. Unlike the traditional way of learning where knowledge is passed on from teachers to students, PBL and invitations advocate for a student-centered approach to knowledge acquisition. Specifically, knowledge is

co-constructed by students while teachers play the role of a facilitator during the inquiry process. In addition, the results of inquiry are presented in multiple ways such as reports, posters, videos, and models. It is also important to note that PBL and invitations are tied closely to literacy education because literacy skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening are frequently, if not always, employed in the inquiry process. Students usually begin the inquiry with the reading and analysis of the existing literature related to the topic of their interest. They also need to speak and listen to each other as the inquiry is conducted collaboratively as a group project. If they choose to present their findings in the form of a report, for example, competence in writing is required. Consequently, PBL and invitations are considered useful for students to learn and apply literacy skills in a self-directed way.

It is also due to the close resemblance between PBL and invitations that people often mistake one for the other and lose sight of their difference. Therefore, a juxtaposition of PBL and invitations will help us know each of them better and how one informs and complements the other. It is not my intention to argue that one learning approach is more favorable than the other, but to present a critical comparison of these two approaches, what we can learn from them, and how to choose between them to better suit our pedagogical context.²

Project-Based Learning

PBL, according to Markham, Larmer, and Ravitz (2003), is focused on experiential, hands-on, student-directed learning, which is embodied in such forms as field trips, laboratory investigations, and interdisciplinary activities that enrich and extend the curriculum. Markham et al. argue that learners actively use what they know to explore, negotiate, interpret, and create in an attempt to construct solutions, thus shifting the emphasis of learning from a teacher-directed to student-centered approach.

John Thomas (2000) reviewed research related to teaching and learning models popularly referred to as project-based learning and found it difficult to give project-based learning a clear definition. He commented:

This diversity of defining features coupled with the lack of a universally accepted model or theory of Project-Based Learning has resulted in a great variety of PBL research and development activities. This variety presents some problems for a research review. (p. 2)

What Thomas encountered in his research is also the challenge faced by this paper. Thus, to make the subsequent comparison between PBL and invitations feasible, I will limit my discussion of PBL to the version proposed by Thomas, who identified five features in distinguishing PBL projects from others. The features include “centrality, driving question, constructive investigations, autonomy, and realism” (Thomas, 2000, p. 3). According to Thomas, PBL projects are central, not peripheral to the curriculum; are focused on questions or problems that drive students to encounter (and struggle with) the central concepts and principles of a discipline; involve students in a constructive investigation; are student-driven to some significant degree; and are realistic, not school-like.

Invitations in Relation to Critical Literacy

Invitations

The concept of invitations was first introduced by Carolyn Burke in a graduate seminar in 1981 and then adapted by literacy educators and researchers such as Van Sluys (2005) and Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008). According to Van Sluys (2005), an invitation consists of four common features: “an initial experience, a formally presented invitation, possible questions to pursue, and related resources” (p. 30). Specifically, an invitation connects to students’ personal interests through initial experiences; formally invites students as decision makers to participate in an inquiry; suggests possible directions for students to explore through inquiry questions; and provides related resources to scaffold the inquiry (see Appendix A for an example of an invitation). In addition, Van Sluys adds that invitations occur in social learning environments; focus on making meaning around one experience; welcome varied experiences, languages, and resources; represent our best current understandings; embrace opportunities to use multiple ways of knowing to construct and contest meaning; value alternative responses; promote the social aspects of learning by taking up issues in students’ lives and placing inquiries within social contexts; encourage practices that reach across all dimensions of critical literacy; and invite further inquiry (Van Sluys, 2005, pp. 5-6).

Critical Literacy

As alluded to previously by Van Sluys, invitations are intertwined theoretically and philosophically with critical literacy. Paulo Freire is one of the best-known educators closely linked to critical literacy. Freire’s (1984) pedagogy of the oppressed, the “prototype” of critical literacy, consists of two stages:

In the first stage, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation. (p. 40)

Aligned with Freire’s pedagogy, critical literacy is intended to help the marginalized unveil unequal power relations and transform their lives through the empowerment of literacy education. Critical literacy argues that being critically literate is acquiring knowledge of literacy that can be turned into action to change the status quo. Knowledge in this sense, according to Giroux and Giroux (2004), “is about more than understanding; it is also about the possibilities of self-determination, individual autonomy, and social agency” (p. 84). Green (2001) argues that critical literacy is concerned with knowing about our social world and knowing how to critique it. Similarly, according to Freire and Macedo (1998), critical literacy involves examining what is present and what is missing, evaluating competing voices, considering who makes decisions and who benefits and who suffers, and taking action to transform social conditions.

Freire’s thought and work have spread beyond Brazil, his native country, and have made a profound impact in literacy education and other disciplines as well. In fact, the scholastic lineage of many of the works in critical literacy (e.g., Comber & Simpson, 2001; Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; McLaren, 1995) can be traced to Freire. Invitations discussed previously are a case in point. Invitations grounded in critical literacy do not only engage students in an inquiry of their own

interest, but also invite them to problematize and investigate power relations in an attempt to promote social justice.

A Comparison between PBL and Invitations

The comparison between PBL and invitations is made in the following dimensions: inquiry question, scope of inquiry, purpose of inquiry, critical thinking versus critical literacy, and action orientation. These dimensions are singled out for discussion in that they seem to be the common features shared by both learning approaches. Yet, a close examination reveals nuances in the dimensions that actually distinguish one approach from the other. The comparative analysis between PBL and invitations is summarized briefly as a preview in the table below while more details will be presented on each dimension later in this section.

Dimension	PBL	Invitation
Inquiry Question	There is a driving question to be answered.	There are a few questions for students to choose from, but students can come up with their own question(s).
Scope of Inquiry	PBL can be applied in many disciplines such as biology, physics, geology, mathematics, music, art, education, economics, medicine, etc.	While invitations can be applied in many disciplines as well, their focus is on literacy, especially critical literacy, education.
Purpose of Inquiry	PBL aims to help students construct, transform, and acquire knowledge or skills that are usually reflected in the culminating products.	Invitations grounded in critical literacy aim to examine the word and the world critically.
Critical Thinking vs. Critical Literacy	PBL helps students develop critical thinking or higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.	Critical literacy should not be conflated to critical thinking. Invitations grounded in critical literacy take a step further to question and investigate critically the legitimacy of texts, social norms, cultural values, etc.
Action Orientation	Students take action to search for resources, construct and present their products, and change their attitude and behavior according to what they have learned from a project.	Invitations rooted in critical literacy are intended to empower students to identify, and take action against, unequal power relationships.

Inquiry Question

Inquiry questions play a crucial role in PBL and invitations. The questions should be “provocative or challenging,” “open-ended and/or complex,” and tied to students’ learning (Larmer, Ross, & Mergendoller, 2009, p. 40). They do not only initiate but also guide, deepen, and sustain the inquiry process. Although students’ input is taken into consideration by both PBL and invitations in formulating inquiry questions, the former is characterized by one driving question while the latter can have more than one question for students to choose from. PBL’s driving question serves to guide students’ inquiry and has to be answered. In contrast, the inquiry questions in an invitation are used as “possible” or “suggested” questions for students to consider. Students can choose to answer one or more of the questions. Alternatively, they can even decline to answer any of the questions (this is why it is called an invitation). Yet, declining to answer the suggested questions does not exempt the students from doing an invitation. Instead, they have to suggest and answer questions of their interest related to the issue to be explored.

In illustration, suppose a PBL project’s driving question is: “How was the Transcontinental Railroad built?” This is the question that guides the inquiry process and has to be answered. In contrast, an invitation usually suggests several questions on the same issue. Such questions could include: “How long did it take to build the Transcontinental Railroad?” “Who built it?” and “Why was it built?” While students can certainly answer all of the questions, they can also choose to answer one or two of them. Alternatively, they can even decline to answer any of the suggested questions if they are interested in other aspects of the issue. For example, they can propose to explore the events that came before the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, the important issues and challenges that came up as plans were made and tracks were laid, or how the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad was viewed by workers, railroad company bosses, and Native Americans. In sum, while a driving question has to be addressed in PBL, students engaged in an invitation have the choice of answering suggested questions or exploring questions of their own interest.

Scope of Inquiry

PBL and invitations can be applied in many disciplines and content areas such as biology, physics, geology, mathematics, music, art, education, economics, medicine, and so on. They can be used to answer inquiry questions such as, “How can we build a website to share information about endangered species?” “Can DNA evidence be trusted in criminal trials?” and “What makes a book classic?” One thing that separates invitations from PBL in the scope of inquiry is their focus on literacy education. This is because invitations, as discussed previously, are grounded theoretically in critical literacy. However, it is important to note that literacy skills are also used in PBL projects. For example, reading skills are certainly needed before one can determine what makes a book classic (the driving question). What is special about literacy in invitations is that it is broadly defined to include not only reading, writing, speaking, listening, drawing, and performing, but also sociopolitical aspects of literacy such as politics and power relationships due to invitations’ connection to critical literacy. In addition, literacy skills in other disciplines are also employed in conducting an invitation. For example, in the invitation on “Exploring Gender Roles” (see Appendix A), students are invited to read books and magazines as well as to examine commercials, movies, television shows, and other media. Obviously, literacy skills such as reading and viewing are needed to engage in this invitation. Moreover, questions like “How much does an average man earn compared to an average woman?” and “When did women in the

United States begin to have the voting right? And why?” may be brought up in their inquiry. The answers to such questions call for knowledge of mathematics, statistics, political science, and history to name a few. Power relationships between men and women throughout history as well as gender biases against women in social and political arenas are also possible issues to explore in the invitation. As a result, while PBL and invitations can be applied in a variety of disciplines, invitations are focused on, but not limited to, literacy, especially critical literacy, education.

Purpose of Inquiry

One of the main objectives of PBL is to engage students in a constructive investigation through a goal-directed process. A PBL project “must involve the transformation and construction of knowledge on the part of students” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, as cited in Thomas, 2000, p. 3). Specifically, the project is not simply about the application of already-learned information or skills, but new understandings or skills obtained through the inquiry process. Students’ learning is embodied in the culminating products that they present at the end of the inquiry. The products can range from written products such as research reports and posters to construction products such as physical models and scientific instruments (Larmer, Ross, & Mergendoller, 2009). As a result, PBL aims to help students construct, transform, and acquire knowledge or skills that are reflected in their products. Both the process and the product are important in PBL.

What was discussed above about PBL is basically true of invitations, but invitations have another important goal on their agenda: employing critical literacy to examine the word and the world critically. Van Sluys (2005) points out that “[w]hile participating in invitations may foster students’ growth as artists, mathematicians, linguists, engineers, musicians, and writers, it also creates space for growing as democratic and/or literate citizens who critically reflect on their world and work to change it” (p. 9). Therefore, invitations are inextricably connected to critical literacy, which argues that literacy is not neutral and should be examined from a critical perspective. In parallel, Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) state that

Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice. (p. 3)

Let us look at an example of how PBL differs from invitations in the purpose of inquiry. Suppose the theme for inquiry is Mother’s Day. For a PBL project, a driving question in this regard can be: “When was the first Mother’s Day celebrated and why?” This question will push students to think about the origin and meaning of this holiday. The knowledge obtained from this inquiry consists of the historical background of Mother’s Day as well as how it becomes a national holiday. In other words, students’ knowledge of Mother’s Day is constructed and transformed through the inquiry. While what was discussed above can be the case for an invitation, an invitation with the purpose of deconstructing power relations and promoting social justice would ask students to investigate Mother’s Day advertisements in the newspapers, magazines, and store circulars. One observation students may make is that the women in the advertisements do not look like typical mothers. They look like models or college students who are young and slim (Van Sluys, 2005). Therefore, subsequent questions for inquiry can be “Why do most of the advertisements portray mothers as young, thin, Caucasian women?” “What about

African American, Latina, or biracial mothers?” and “How are mothers positioned in the advertisements and why?” Answering these questions entails an investigation of social, racial, and cultural issues and stereotypes.

Consequently, both PBL and invitations value the socially constructive process of an investigation and the culminating product that demonstrate students’ learning. However, the issues of politics, power relationships, and social justice are foregrounded in invitations while such issues may be brought up in PBL, but are not its focus.

Critical Thinking versus Critical Literacy

PBL helps students “build skills valuable for today’s world, such as critical thinking/problem solving, collaboration, and communication, which are taught and assessed” (Larmer, Ross, & Mergendoller, 2009, p. 30). Similarly, critical thinking (and other skills as well) is what is valued in invitations. However, critical thinking is often mistaken to be equivalent to critical literacy. I have argued that critical literacy should not be conflated to critical thinking because the former entails more than the latter (Lee, 2011). Specifically, invitations grounded in critical literacy encourage the development and growth of not only critical thinking or higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, but also critical literacy practices that focus on “identifying social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and unequal power relationships in place” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, both PBL and invitations expect students to acquire critical thinking skills, but invitations are also characterized by a focus on the sociopolitical dimension of the inquiry. Compared to PBL, invitations take a step further to question and investigate critically the legitimacy of texts, social norms, and cultural values, which are used to position the readers.

Action Orientation

Both PBL and invitations are action-based, but manifested in different aspects. Students engaged in PBL, for example, take action to search for resources in an attempt to answer the driving question. Action is also taken to construct products (e.g., models, posters, and brochures) as well as to present them to a public audience. Students may also change their attitude and behavior in their daily lives in response to what they have learned from a project. An example is that they become more environmentally conscious and begin to recycle useful resources and buy energy efficient appliances after completing a project on pollution.

Similarly, through an invitation, students may obtain learning experiences and make transformations in their lives as discussed above. In addition, critical literacy practices embedded in invitations are intended to empower students, especially those unfavorably positioned or marginalized by texts or social norms, to identify unequal power relationships and take action to resist them. The action taken here is for the purpose of challenging and changing the status quo of the marginalized and promoting social justice. Van Sluys (2005) gave an example of how a fifth grader Alissa, after being excluded by boys from playing football during noon recess, was invited to bring the issue up in her class meeting for discussion “that then expanded to include the gender lines that permeate professional sports and the job market in general” (p. 12). In addition, the class decided to draft a set of new rules for noon-hour football that reflected a

significant revision based on their discussion. This example shows how an invitation is used to make issues visible and to organize collective power (i.e., the class as a whole) for social change. This is reminiscent of what Freire (1984) believes an authentic “word” (or literacy) should be:

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (p. 75)

Thus invitations grounded in action-based critical literacy have the potential to transform our lives against social and cultural ideologies. Though such action is not necessarily guaranteed, a critical awareness, at least, is raised through doing an invitation. In contrast, action oriented toward social justice is not an explicit telos in PBL projects.

Discussion

As discussed above, there are several aspects that distinguish PBL from invitations. However, it is possible to begin with one of them, but end up doing the other. For example, in one of my classes, students were asked to do a PBL project in small groups according to the following directions:

Suppose that your school district is mandated to use Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) as a primary reading assessment to assess students’ reading proficiency. As a reading expert/teacher in your school, you are concerned about what DIBELS can and cannot do for your students. Therefore, the driving question for this project is: “What are the pros and cons of DIBELS?”

Some of the groups began this inquiry by finding and reading articles about DIBELS. The articles usually led them to other resources for further and deeper inquiry. Other groups interviewed elementary school teachers and students who used DIBELS in their classrooms. They videotaped the interviews for data analysis and then presented the pros and cons of DIBELS from the teachers’ and students’ perspectives. The end product of this inquiry took various forms, including papers, power point presentations, posters, brochures, booklets, and videos.

One of the groups did not only answer the driving question, but also dug deeper into the sociopolitical controversies of DIBELS. This group pointed out that DIBELS was featured as if it were an approved assessment in the handbook/guidebook published by the Education Department to assist states in preparing Reading First grant (a federal grant for funding research-based reading programs) applications (Dessoff, 2007). By taking this route, this group of students actually crossed over to the domain of an invitation grounded in critical literacy where the power relationships behind the adoption and popularity of DIBELS were examined critically. This is an example where students began an inquiry as a PBL project and expanded it into an invitation.

In contrast, it is also possible to do an invitation in a “PBL-like” manner. This usually happens when the inquiry question is not investigated from a sociopolitical perspective. For example, issues such as power relationships and social justice (e.g., whose voice is heard and whose voice is silenced in the selection of a reading assessment) can be left unexplored in an invitation, thus making it little different from a PBL project. In sum, while it is possible for a

PBL project to change into an invitation and vice versa, critical literacy practices remain the key that distinguishes one from the other.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the similarities and differences between two learning approaches. PBL and invitations emphasize the process and product of learning and the importance of developing questions to guide the inquiry. In addition, the scope of inquiry for both approaches includes many different disciplines. However, invitations are more concerned with literacy education as they are grounded in critical literacy. Social justice and power relationships are foregrounded in invitations, whereas these issues do not necessarily play a central role in PBL. Furthermore, invitations are oriented toward promoting social justice while PBL does not consider it a priority. It is also important to note that, although these learning approaches are similar in some aspects, it is the critical literacy practices that distinguish invitations from PBL.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate the point I made in the beginning of this paper that it is not my intention to argue that one approach is better than the other. Instead, we as educators are constantly reminded of the importance of knowing our students and building our teaching on what they know, need, and/or are interested in. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) did a study on the traits of good teachers and found that teachers fell in this category not because they used a specific teaching or learning approach (whether teacher-directed or student-centered) that is superior to others, but because they incorporated what students could relate to (e.g., their language and culture) into the curriculum. Similarly, this paper is not intended to lead the readers to favor one approach over the other in that the success of teaching/learning depends on many factors such as teachers, students, and contexts. Instead, it is hoped that this paper will serve as a prompt for more conversations among those who are interested in knowing more about PBL and invitations and considering implementing them in their classrooms.

Notes

¹ Critical literacy is influenced strongly by Paulo Freire's (1984) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The term critical literacy was used in the 1980s, and its first appearance "as a book title came only in 1993 with the publication of Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren's edited collection, *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*" (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. vii). Critical literacy is intended to empower literacy learners, especially the underprivileged, through literacy education. More discussion of critical literacy will be provided later in this paper.

² There are other inquiry-based learning approaches such as inquiry circles (Harvey & Daniels, 2009) that resemble PBL and invitations in several ways. While readers are encouraged to look into other approaches, this paper will focus on the comparison between PBL and invitations.

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Appendix A

Invitation: Exploring Gender Roles

(adapted from Van Sluys, 2005, p. 29)

An Initial Experience

Last week when we were in the library, Kaitlyn complained that she could hardly find books about female scientists for her project. She said that most of the books portrayed women as nurses, secretaries, hair stylists.... She was wondering whether the books we read actually reflect the jobs women can do.

A Formally Presented Invitation

Authors write stories that convey characters, plots, settings, and conflicts through words and illustrations. Readers pay attention to what is happening in the story. Critical readers also look at what stories say about the world. You are invited to explore texts of your choosing. Some are included with this invitation; however, also feel free to explore the classroom library, books, or magazines you are currently reading, commercials you are familiar with, movies, television shows, etc.

Possible Questions to Pursue

- Consider what the authors, illustrators, and designers are saying about girls and boys.
- How are pictures, dialogue, narrative, layout, etc., used in communicating messages?
- Think about your position in relationship to what the authors have to say.

Related Resources

Picture books that challenge traditional gender roles:

- *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, illustrated by Caroline Binch
- *William's Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow, illustrated by William Pene Du Bois
- *Benny Bakes a Cake* by Eve Rice, illustrated by Eve Rice
- *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch, illustrated by Michael Martchenko

