

# **The Implementation of Project-based-learning in China's Higher Education: A Case Study**

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## **Research Domains**

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

## **Abstract**

Enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes constitutes a major challenge for lecturers. While Project-based-learning has been advocated in China as a pedagogy which actively engages learners in authentic and meaningful projects, most existing research focuses on learner experience in PjBL-based classes, thus indicating a need for more empirical research to understand lecturer perspectives and how PjBL is implemented across multiple institutional, departmental and classroom contexts. This case study examines one lecturer's implementation of PjBL as a module pedagogy at one higher education institution in southwestern China, to capture the way in which PjBL is implemented within daily practices. This study generates insights into PjBL as a relatively novel yet challenging pedagogy, as situated in specific classroom and departmental circumstances. It uncovers context-specific meanings/aspects of PjBL, i.e., practitioner perception of PjBL, affordances of teaching and learning resources. The findings have the potential to inform future PjBL teaching and learning.

## **Full paper**

## **Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed remarkable reforms and improvements in China's higher education (HE); however, there are

issues that remain. Firstly, HE modules are oftentimes implemented through traditional teacher-centred lecturing that oftentimes disengages students (Barman, 2013); secondly, large classroom sizes and a deep-seated examination-oriented culture have engendered widespread textbook-focused instruction. Such teaching modes have resulted in student inability to apply what they have learnt in real-world contexts, or to promote critical skills or integrated competence for future-focused developmental purposes. All these issues necessitate the exploration of more effective and authentic pedagogies, such as Project-based-learning (PjBL). To fruitfully implement PjBL, lecturers need to be 'pedagogically mobile' and position themselves and their students in imaginative spaces they have not been before.

## **Literature Review**

PjBL represents a learner-centred instructional method engaging learners in knowledge acquisition and application through real-world artefact development (Krajcik & Shin, 2014). PjBL has also gained some prevalence in China's HE, with copious positive evidence on its promoting learning outcomes; however, the utility of PjBL as a pedagogy is oftentimes appreciated in macro affective aspects, i.e., student motivation (Gu, 2007), and satisfaction (Wang, 2012). Most existing research is also limited to the cases of learners or learning itself (Beckett & Slater, 2019), thus hindering lecturers' understanding of quality PjBL-based pedagogy for classroom-based instructions. Additionally, existing research has predominately been conducted from psychological stances. An alternative perspective is social theories of teaching and learning, i.e., Trowler's (2005) proposed sociological level of analysis. Finally, most PjBL research in China comprises small-scale practitioner reports, hence signaling the need to appreciate PjBL implementation from a more detached research perspective.

This paper focuses on one of two case studies which investigate PjBL implementation in China's HE and the ways in which such PjBL-based approaches are negotiated and shaped by local contexts. Data

collection for case study two is in progress. Borrowing from Trowler & Kreber (2009), my overriding epistemology is that the locus of analyses of changes should be on practices rather than individuals. This study considers the narrower and wider contexts in which individuals operate, which influence the ways in which innovations are processed, sustained, supported or rejected by others. The research questions are:

1. How are PjBL, or PjBL-relevant pedagogies implemented in lecturers' everyday practices?
2. In what ways are such PjBL or PjBL-relevant pedagogies affected by the institutional/departmental cultures?

### **Data collection and analysis**

The case study investigates one module in a programme which prepares undergraduate students for their future careers as English language teachers. Data collected longitudinally comprises (i) weekly classroom observations of the PjBL-based module (ii) classroom observations of other English-as-the-medium-of-instruction modules in the same department, (iii) semi-structured interviews with module team, dean and departmental head, (iv) field notes from accompanying the lecturer during working days, (v) documents (i.e., module teaching plan, departmental regulations of teaching and learning) and (vi) representations of student projects. An inductive approach has guided an initial thematic analysis to capture the themes regarding the RQs since they present some levels of patterned responses or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

### **Initial findings**

PjBL implementation is affected by several aspects. (i) The lecturer's

own interpretations of the concept of PjBL and of the local context, which influence PjBL implementation in day-to-day classroom settings, as reflected in how they emphasise that a real-world external audience for student projects is unavailable. (ii) Their ongoing reflections on PjBL practices enable them to identify crucial issues and amend practices. (iii) Successful implementation of PBL hinges on the availability of teaching and learning resources. Given a lack of resources available, the lecturer took the initiative to explore and exploit resources beyond campus, to update approaches to teaching and facilitate implementation of PjBL. (iv) PjBL implementation is shaped by the departmental/institutional cultures, i.e., ways of getting things done and local pedagogical practices aligned with departmental and institutional regulations and the national syllabus. It could be argued that the imaginative geographies of the lecturer, namely the many communities they find themselves in affect their approach to PjBL. (v) The autonomy of the lecturer and students affects PjBL implementation. The lecturer has control over the nature/contents of student projects, and student autonomy in project work shape the PjBL-based learning outcomes. By illuminating the adoption and adaptation of PjBL to suit departmental, institutional and national culture, these findings shed empirical light on pedagogy as a form of social practice (Leake, 2019). Moreover, they carry pragmatic weight in guiding the ongoing data collection and analysis at case study two.

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