

How My Classroom Survived the Zombie Apocalypse:

A short story about why Project Based Learning should be in your zombie survival kit!

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One of the worst feelings a teacher can have is when a lesson is not working, and the students have no interest in you or what you have to say. It is like a zombie apocalypse, it comes swiftly and there is little to do to reverse the situation. Standing in front of my class, speaking about nouns, diagramming sentences on the board and referencing texts, I felt a cold chill descend upon me. I turned to feel the full weight of their glazed stares. Students sat lifelessly in their seats with their mouths hanging open and bodies slightly slanted on the verge of falling over. It is the look of lost interest. It was the beginning of the end, the death of logic and reasoning and the birth of my zombie students!

I barely survived that moment, I am not too proud as to admit I was scared. I was petrified. I had no idea what had induced this zombie like comma or how to intervene. I stood there with a look of bewilderment upon my face as I slowly backed up until my back was against the wall. I knew any sudden movements could unleash a complete brain feast. I froze and prayed the dismissal bell would sound soon. I was in luck as the last remaining minutes of class passed by and the herd of zombies shambled past me and

November 2018 Volume 7, Number 3

out into the hallway. I was terrified and confused and knew not where to turn.

Ultimately, I found myself cowering in the corner of the teacher's lounge quietly rocking back and forth, muttering about the zombies, the zombies!!! It wasn't long before I was joined by other teachers all as scared and confused as I, for they had no better luck with their language arts lessons either. Their students too had transformed before their very eyes. There was no hope, the apocalypse had hit their classrooms too.

Defeated and more than a little concerned with the next day's battle, I spent that afternoon at home on the computer trying to figure out how to motivate my students, facilitate their connection to the standards, and bring them back from the legions of the undead. As the night wore on, I began to feel myself beginning to transform from human to zombie. There were just too many teacher websites and blogs. Site after site with no solution, that's when I realized there is no simple cure, no solve it all lesson plan, or paid website I could follow. As a teacher I was lost, frustrated and horrified at the prospect of facing another zombie herd. I could not allow these feelings or my students to consume me.

The next day after another close encounter with my undead students I ran into a former professor. Somehow through my overwhelming frustration I managed to communicate a garbled description of the horrific situation I had found myself in. I spoke of my pristine lesson plans, meticulous objectives, thorough assessments and yes of the disturbing results of such: zombie children. By the conclusion of my teary rant, I was sobbing. I knew there was another way, a better way to teach, a method that did not transform my brilliant students into stagnant, putrid puddles of rotting gray matter. My pleas did not fall upon deaf ears, as my professor invited me to visit her elementary

November 2018 Volume 7, Number 3

school to witness a different way of teaching. I didn't hesitate to accept the invitation and ventured to this school the next day.

The moment I walked through the doors it was a different. This school was not plagued with zombies. The students were engaging, asking questions, researching and writing. They were, most importantly, happy to be at school! How could this be? What were they feeding these students? The answer: Project Based Learning (PBL). "Project-based learning is a term used currently in the United States to describe pedagogy that involves students in kindergarten through high school in learning by doing—a strong tradition in American education reaching back to the work of John Dewey at the turn of the twentieth century" (Nation, 2008, p.105).

I spent that afternoon feverishly writing questions down and researching. The first inquiry that came to mind was: What is the difference between completing a project with students and implementing PBL? PBL is more than a review and product of recall. Students learn the material by completing the project. According to Larmer & Mergendoller (2010), PBL requires the use of higher cognitive processes, collaboration, assorted forms of communication, and inquiry as part of the process of learning and creating something new. PBL allows for student voice to be heard. Reflection and revision are necessary elements of PBL as well.

Was this the solution to the zombie outbreak at my school? I wasn't sure but found myself ready to implement this methodology into my own classroom, after all what's the worst that could happen? I become a snack for the teacher's pet? Succeed or fail, I knew I had to try something to squash the epidemic before it spread further. I returned to my classroom and prepared for battle, but this time I allowed more student

November 2018 Volume 7, Number 3

choice. I even asked my students to lead the explorations. Bravely, I stood before the masses of nearly undead, knees as weak as jello, and asked a simple yet shocking question, “what do you want to learn?” For the students who were teetering on the brink of glazed eyes, this invitation to exercise control over their own learning was just enough to bring them back from the verge of zombie transformation. I heard muffled responses from confused pupils. One answered “well, I would like to run a store”. Another spoke up and stated that they like to cook. Some other students mentioned their affinity for board games, and others chimed in mentioning a desire to be outdoors in the dirt.

As student interest began to direct our classroom investigations, questions began to emerge. From here, a nearly supernatural curiosity and drive to understand the answers took hold.

Together with my students, we began to explore subject matter that was of interest to them and activities began to form that I could easily align to educational standards developed. As an active participant in the learning process, my students and I expanded upon their interests; we grew and harvested a garden, baked culinary masterpieces, created board games and developed a school store! It was a slow transition, but I could see the difference in my students’ thought processes. During the time spent creating board games, my pupils evolved from silent zombies to lively participants, commenting and reflecting upon their learning. Students made astute observations regarding their game boards and pieces: “I need to have stands for my players, so they stay standing” and “I need something heavy for the edge of my board because the game would not lay flat.” Others reflected upon their finished product noting that “using a big die made the game more fun.”

November 2018 Volume 7, Number 3

I slowly began to reclaim my classroom as a space for the living. I learned quickly that a PBL classroom wouldn't happen overnight. Many times, my hubris would lead me to believe that I had accomplished the unthinkable. I had permanently banished the zombie hordes from my classroom then like the plague it would return. As student interest would dissipate, the number of slack jaws, drooping eyelids, glazed stares and occasional audible moans would increase. In moments such as these, I plead with you all, heed the warning and move onto another exploration. It takes time and practice to adopt PBL in an everyday classroom lifestyle. It may require teachers and students to venture out of their traditional comfort zones.

Adopting PBL in my classroom has been a long and trying journey, but I would not change anything, except perhaps the zombie invasion however in reflection this is what it took to send me down the PBL path. Had I never turned around to witness the cold lifeless stares of my students; never experienced firsthand the horrors that occur every day in classrooms across our nation as teachers' backs are turned to the white boards and students morph into mindless zombies, I would have never begun this journey, fought this battle or found one of the most effective tools in defeating hordes of zombie pupils: PBL. Project Based Learning is not a top-secret cure all, you will not find it on a highly guarded shelf at the CDC, rather it is one accessible tool that can and should be used to ensure students receive an authentic, meaningful education not to mention it's supernatural power of zombie reversal.

So, I leave you with this parting thought: your lesson plans and zombie apocalypse survival kit should have some overlap, aside from the aspirin, coffee, and Band-Aids PBL should be in both. After all, you never know when you may turn around

November 2018 Volume 7, Number 3

to find your students have begun the transformation from pupil to zombie so be prepared!

Your brains will thank you.

References

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