

PBL: a narrative for Ofsted

February 3, 2014 by Sarah S.



Since September we have been preparing for our Ofsted visit. While this has taken the form of intensive work scrutinies, observations and learning walks – features not only of rigorous preparation but of a good school embedding consistent baseline expectations and consistently good teaching – we now need to turn to PBL, and how we are to describe its impact on our learners.

Ofsted n all that

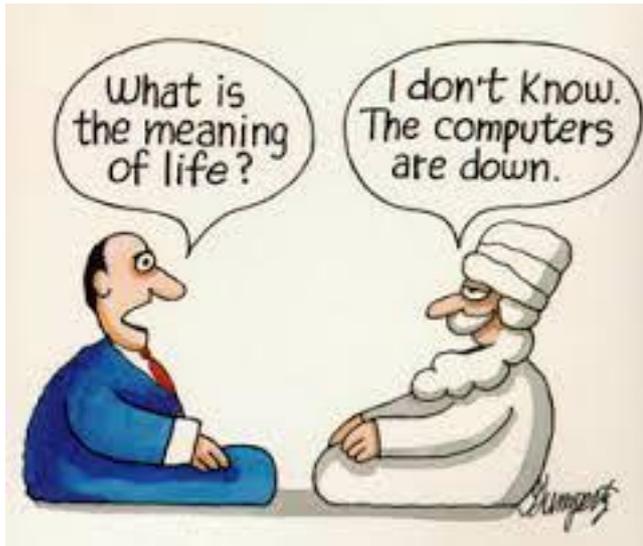
We should start with Ofsted itself. As part of a survey of inspections of outstanding English teaching in schools, Ofsted found that:

The best schools provided students with tasks that had practical outcomes beyond the classroom, thus reinforcing the importance and relevance of the subject, but this was not common enough across the survey schools.

Secondary schools should also:

- *ensure that the English curriculum at Key Stage 3 has a clear and distinct purpose that is explained to students and builds in, where possible, tasks, audiences and purposes that engage students with the world beyond the classroom*
- *strengthen whole-school literacy work across all departments to ensure that students extend and consolidate their literacy skills in all appropriate contexts.*

We are therefore already well-placed to describe the benefits of PBL in Junior Academy.



Why are we here?

It is worth writing here, and not only for those new to the school, what brought us to our partnership with the Innovation Unit and PBL in the first place. Previous Ofsted reports identified a lack of student engagement at KS3. As a result of this, we embarked upon 18 months of research to find a method which ensured that students had the skills to carry out collaborative, creative and critical exploration of real-world essential questions. We were led to the PBL method because it seemed to fit with our mission to educate 'the whole child'. Study visits to High Tech High confirmed that our particular students would benefit hugely from a method which differentiated almost effortlessly – students critique each others' work, redraft according to their own abilities, and produce a final product which, by the very process of structured peer-assessment, shouts 'progress'! Student engagement is one of the most important elements of the method – and the one which, research suggests, leads to the best progress. After Christine had carried out extensive visits to our feeder primary schools, spending a week in at least three of them, it became clear that creating a smaller 'human scale' school within a school where skills learnt and developed at KS1 and KS2 would not only facilitate transition but effectively address the 'dip' that secondary schools are so often accused of ignoring!

How are we facilitating the delivery of PBL?

It is the distinctive scheduling – or timetabling – that makes PBL different from the delivery of single core subjects. By combining English/Hums and Maths/Science, we have provided longer blocks of time which facilitate extended enquiry and product creation, and we have tried to create a 'family' feel to our Junior Academy, not least because the students have strengthened relationships with fewer teachers. There is also the opportunity for a depth of learning with less and less of the 'teacher' as a mainstay –

ask Claire Slocombe to describe her yr 8s to you. She has said herself that she learns 'with them'. This is powerful stuff.



What about assessment?

We are assessing every six weeks. Every student has a level for each subject that they study. This is part of PBL delivery, not an addition. It is still important that students can articulate what they doing, how they are doing it, why they are doing it, and what they need to improve. They don't need to know levels – C&M don't use levels for example – but they do need to be able to talk about their learning, their discoveries, their experiences, and their progress to anyone who asks them.

Ofsted is not anti-PBL, and PBL is not Ofsted-unfriendly. But we do need to understand why we are delivering the curriculum in this way to our students, and be able to talk to any visitors about the benefits to our students.

What are our next steps? We need to be honest about the stage we are at in this pilot. At the moment, our priority is for moderation of assessments, especially for those of us delivering part of the curriculum that we are not used to assessing. We also need to work more closely with John Bosselman of HTH to ensure that exhibition is part of the process, not a mere 'display' at the end. These are fine to be getting along with. And: we have come a LONG way since September.