

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

BY JOHN SPENCER



JOHN SPENCER

ABOUT THIS TOOLBOX

Chances are, you're probably curious about project-based learning. Maybe you've heard the term before but you're not sure what it means. Perhaps you've tried to do projects before but they fell flat or they weren't aligned to the standards or the groups didn't function well. For me, the PBL journey started back when I was in middle school when I did this epic project that changed my life forever. Later, when I was a teacher, I wanted to be that same kind of teacher for my own students. Maybe your story is like mine. Perhaps you have that epic teacher who inspired you to become a teacher and now you want to do the same thing for your students but you're not sure where to start. If so, this toolbox is designed for you.



TEACHERS AROUND THE WORLD HAVE THE SAME QUESTIONS . . .

For the last few years, I've done PBL training throughout the world and I've surveyed teachers who are just starting out with project-based learning. I expected to see huge regional and national differences but the questions we have are pretty universal.



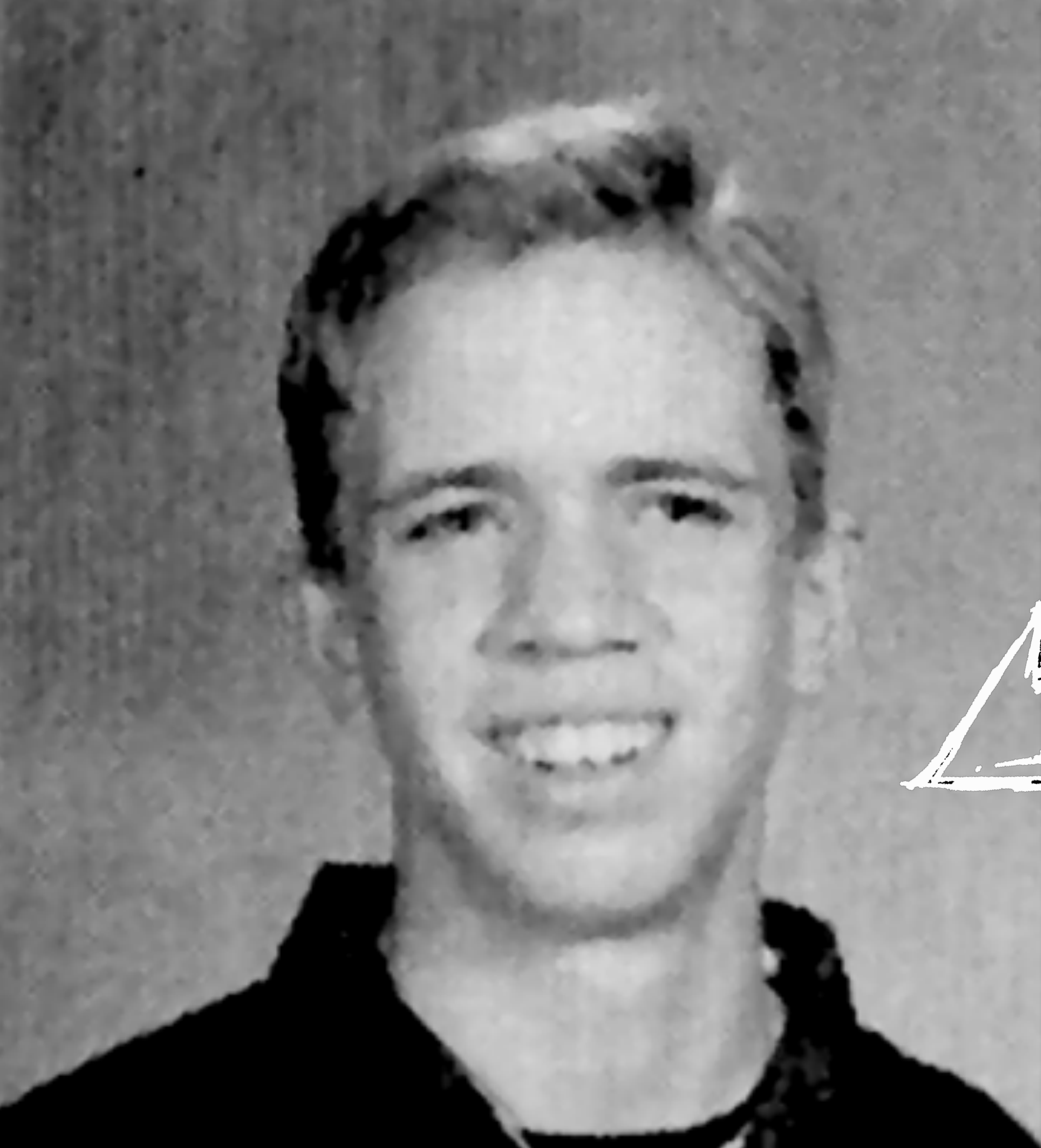
THE TEN MOST COMMON QUESTIONS

- #1: Why do we need PBL?
- #2: What is the “right way” to do PBL?
- #3: What if I don’t have the best technology?
- #4: What about the standards?
- #5: What about the test?
- #6: How do you make time for PBL?
- #7: Won’t classroom management be a nightmare?
- #8: How do we assess it?
- #9: What are some PBL ideas in my content area?
- #10: Where do I start?



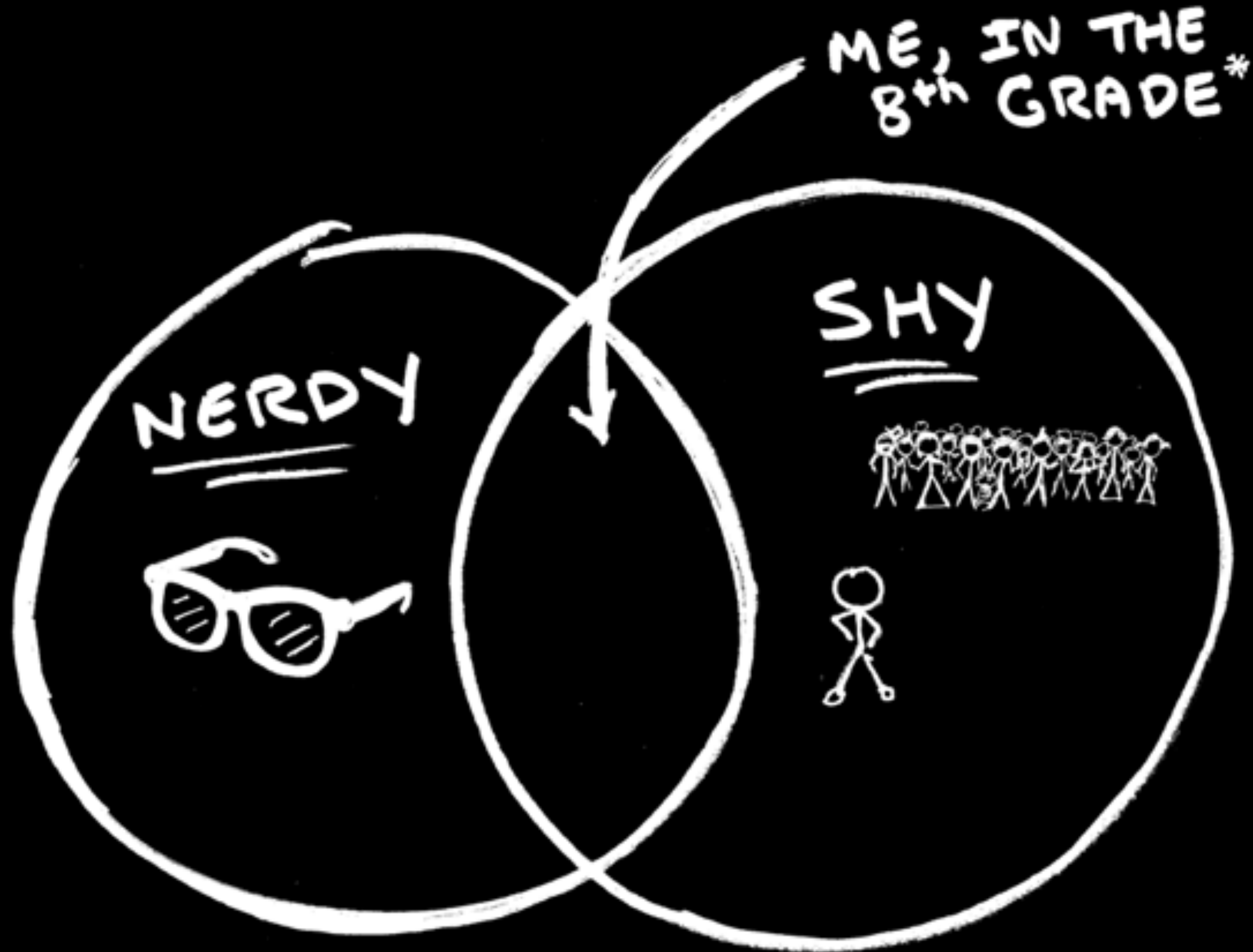
WHY DO WE NEED PROJECT-BASED LEARNING?





THIS WAS ME
IN THE
8TH GRADE





When I was in the 8th grade, I was a combination of shy and nerdy. My whole goal was to remain invisible. I had one friend, this kid named Matt. We were two nerds in a pod. And, fortunately for me, he had perfect attendance year after year. Until, one day he was sick. I stood in the cafeteria, looking out at the sea of students, someone would invite me over. But it didn't happen. I hid in boy's restroom for the next 24 minutes.



I WAS
INVISIBLE



BUT NOT TO MRS.
SMOOT OR MR.
DARROW



THEY
KNEW ME



They took the time to see me and realize I was more than just a shy nerd. They knew I cared about social justice and baseball and history, so they invited me to do a History Day project.



SOCIAL JUSTICE

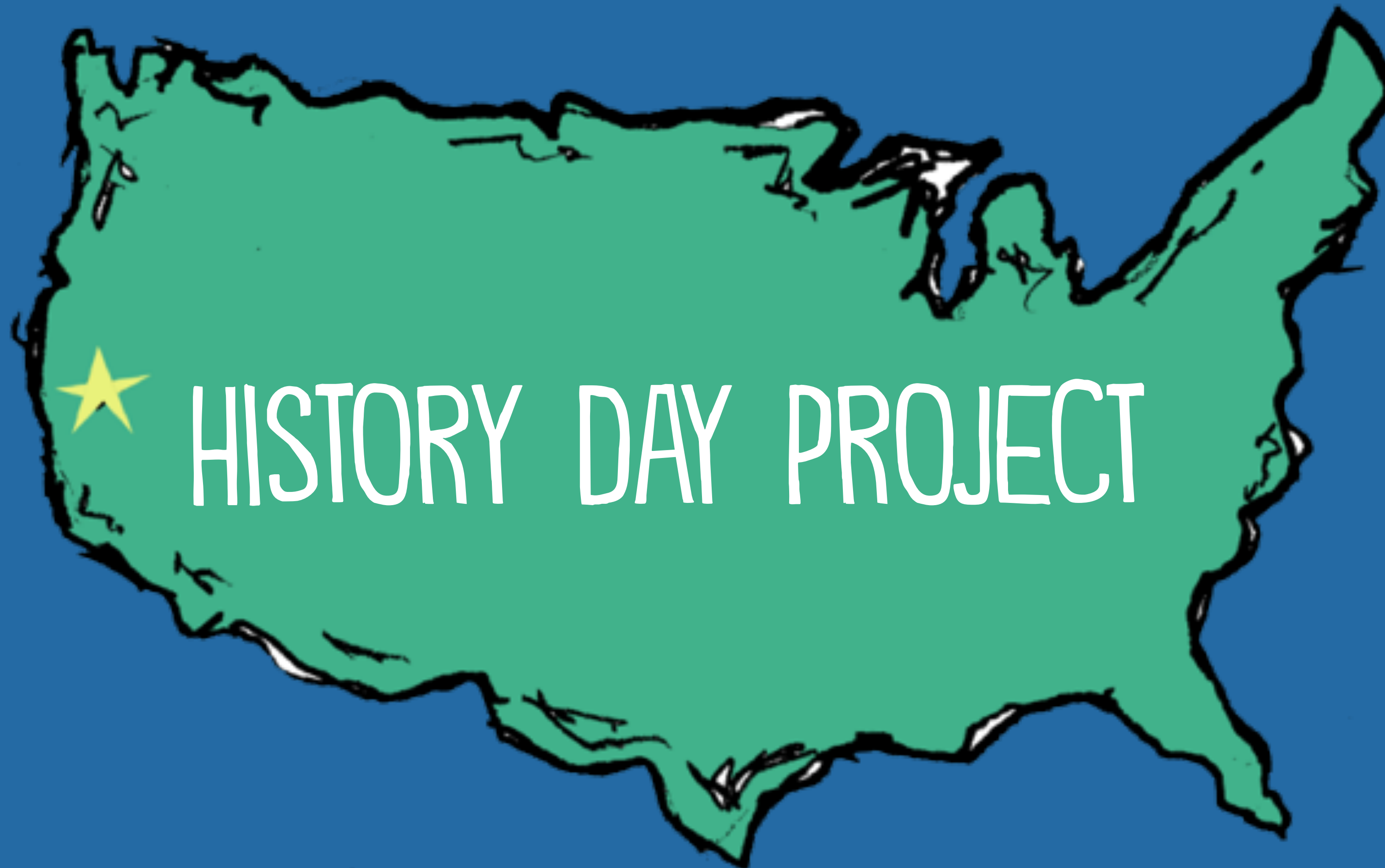


BASEBALL



HISTORY





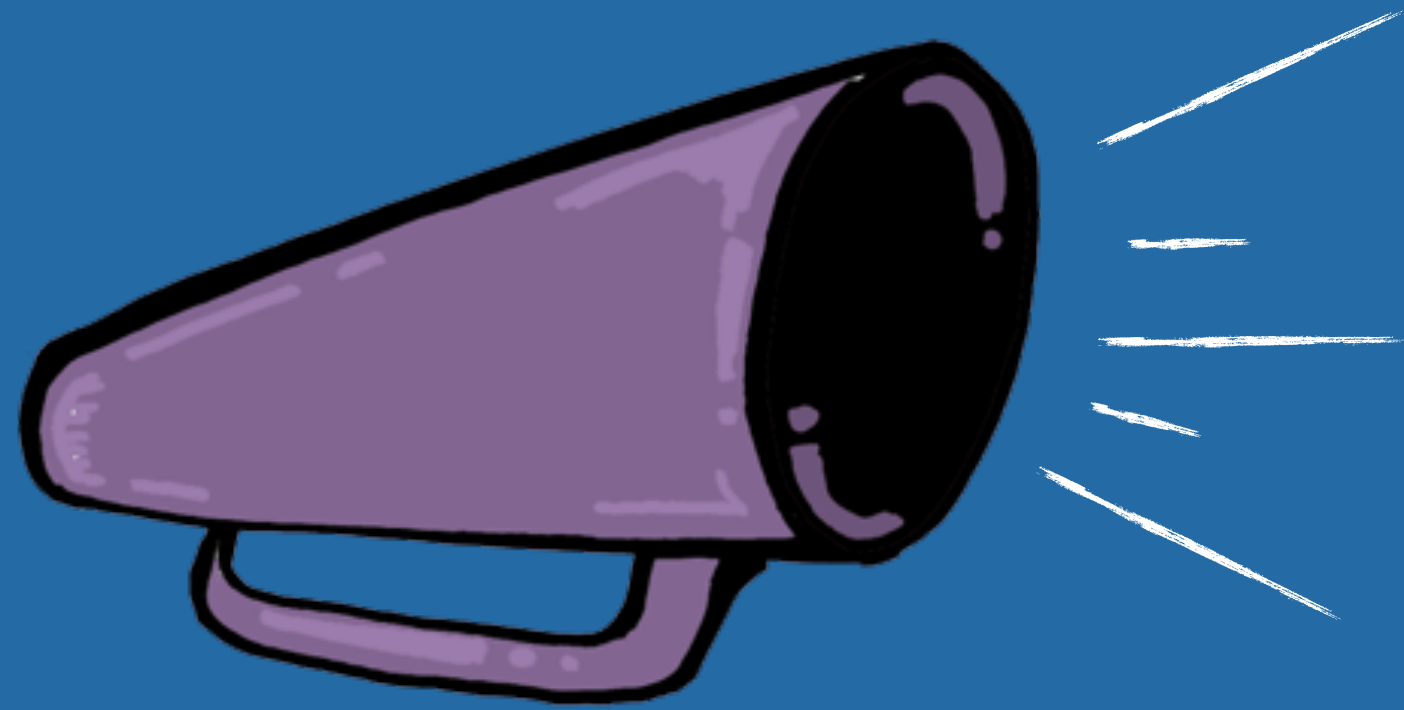
Although it was fun, it was also terrifying. I had to plan the entire project and track my own progress. I had to figure out what questions to ask and where to find the answers. I had to narrow down my topic to something I cared about—in this case, Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball. I wrote letters to newscasters and made phone calls to former players. I remember picking up the phone, my hands trembling, as I read aloud my pre-recorded script and waited for the stranger to respond. I eventually worked on a slide presentation.

The most nerve-wracking moment occurred when I sat in a radio studio recording my script. When I listened to my voice for the first time, I hated it.

At one point, I threw my hands up in the air. “I’m not doing this,” I said.

But she said something that stuck with me forever.



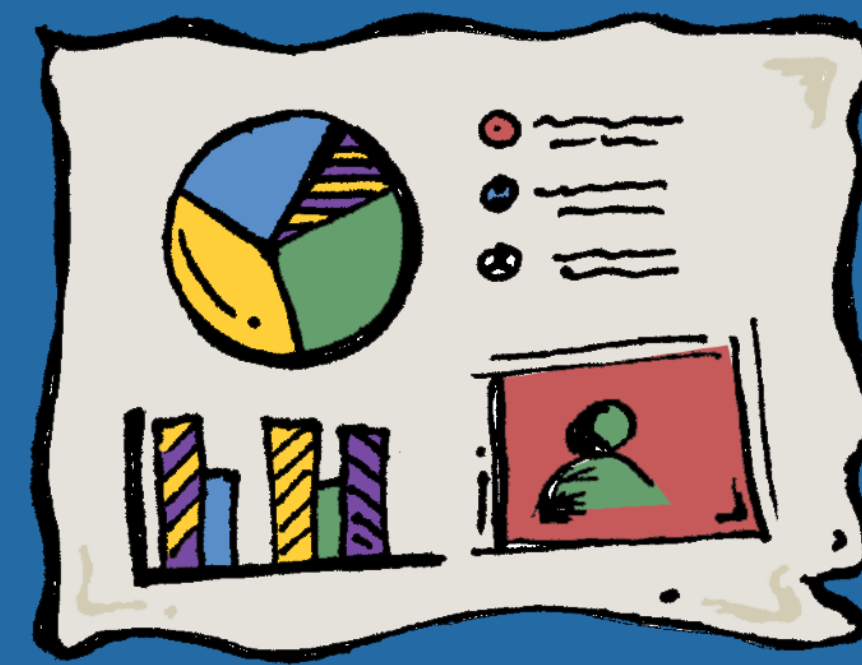


"WHEN YOU HIDE YOUR VOICE,
YOU ROB THE WORLD OF YOUR
CREATIVITY."

— MRS. SMOOT —



I ended up sharing it with my class and then in the district competition, state competition and eventually in Washington D.C.



CREATIVE THINKER AND PROBLEM-SOLVER

Although I didn't realize it at the time, Mrs. Smoot was why I became an educator. That project helped me grow into a creative thinker and problem-solver. And that experience is why I ultimately embraced project-based learning.



THE SAME IS TRUE
OF OUR STUDENTS!

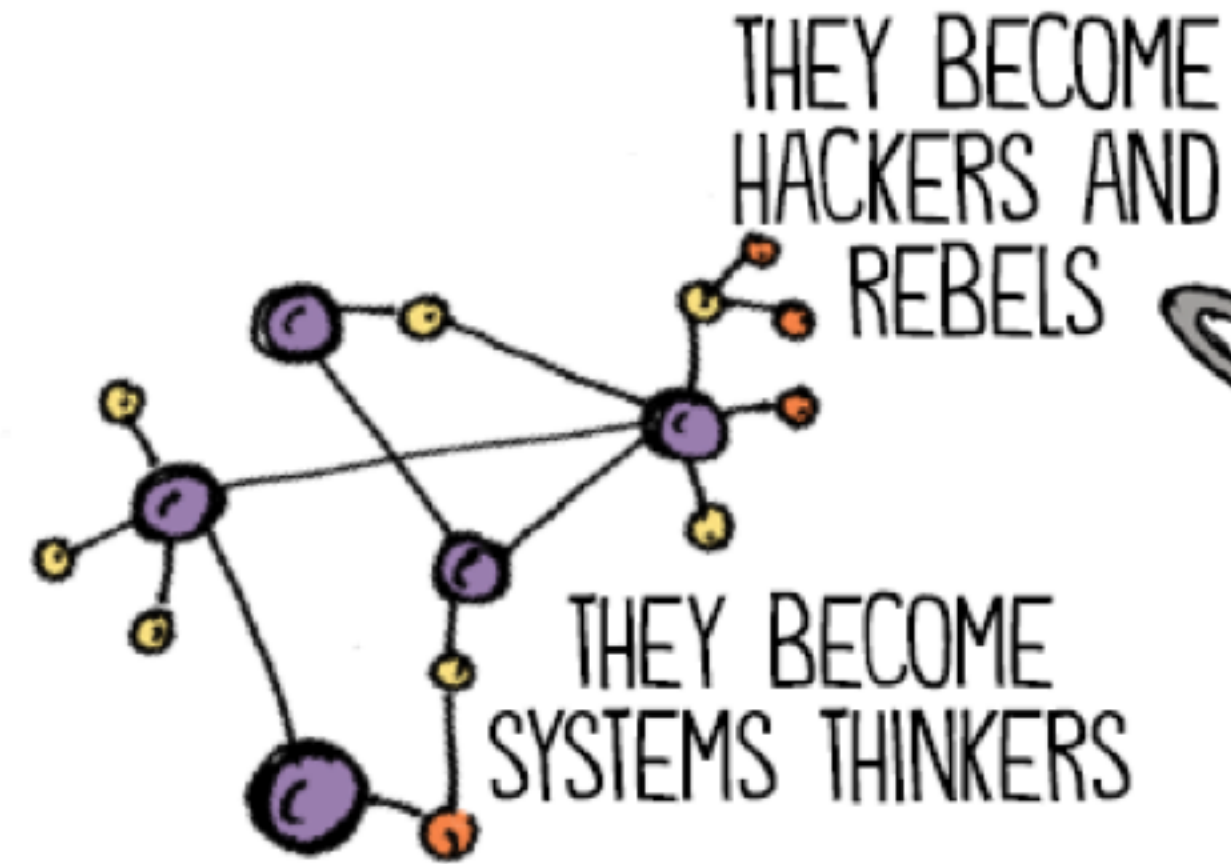




THEY LEARN
PROJECT MANAGEMENT



THEY GROW MORE
EMPATHETIC



THEY BECOME
SYSTEMS THINKERS

THEY BECOME
HACKERS AND
REBELS



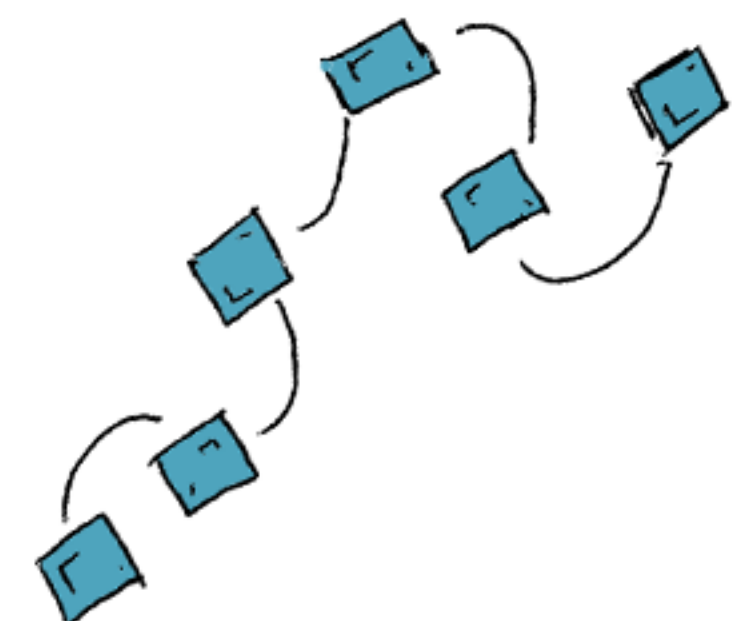
THEY BECOME EXPLORERS



THEY BECOME WILDLY
AND UNABASHEDLY
DIFFERENT



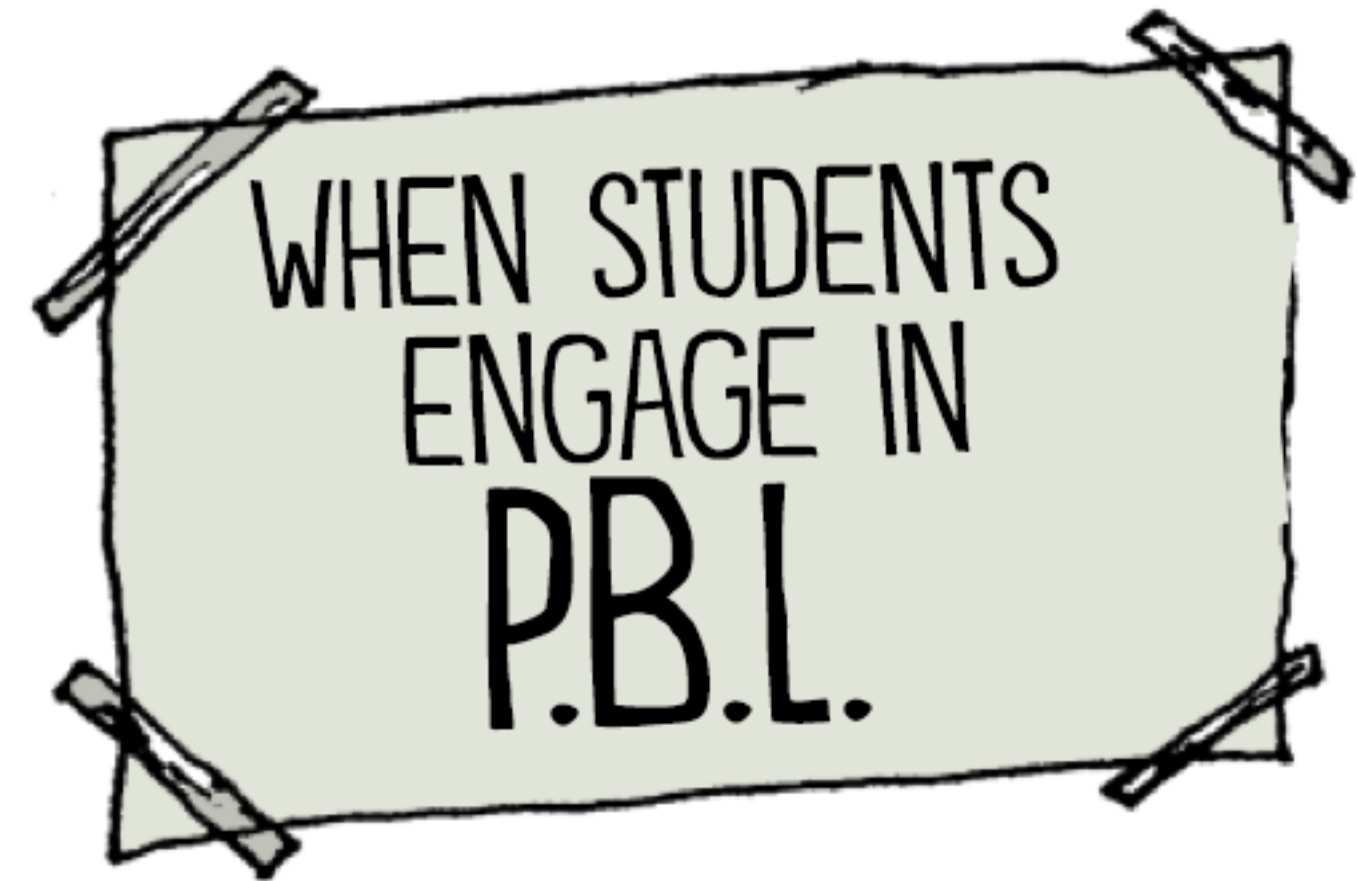
THEY ARE
MORE ENGAGED
IN THE LEARNING



THEY ENGAGE
IN ITERATIVE
THINKING



THEY BECOME
PROBLEM-SOLVERS



THEY THINK DIVERGENTLY
(THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX BY
THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT THE BOX)



THEY MAKE DEEP
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN
IDEAS



THEY ARE READY FOR
THE CREATIVE ECONOMY



THEY LEARN TO TAKE
CREATIVE RISKS

AND YET, IT'S
MORE NECESSARY
THAN EVER.





OUR WORLD IS CHANGING



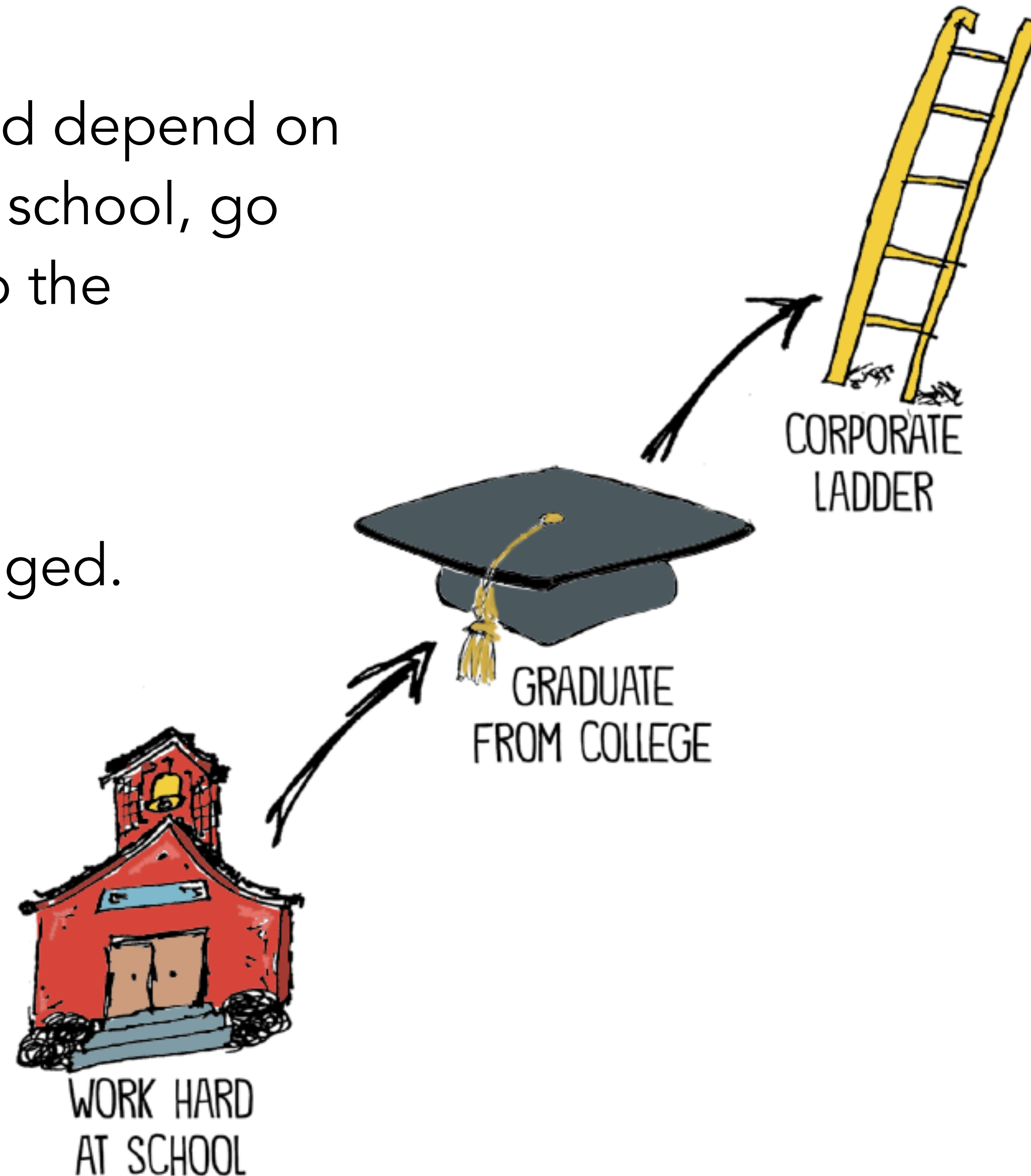
According to Moore's Law, technological developments tend to double every six months. Things that sounded like science fiction a generation ago are now so commonplace we take them for granted. We are in an era of rapid changes in social, technological, and economic systems.

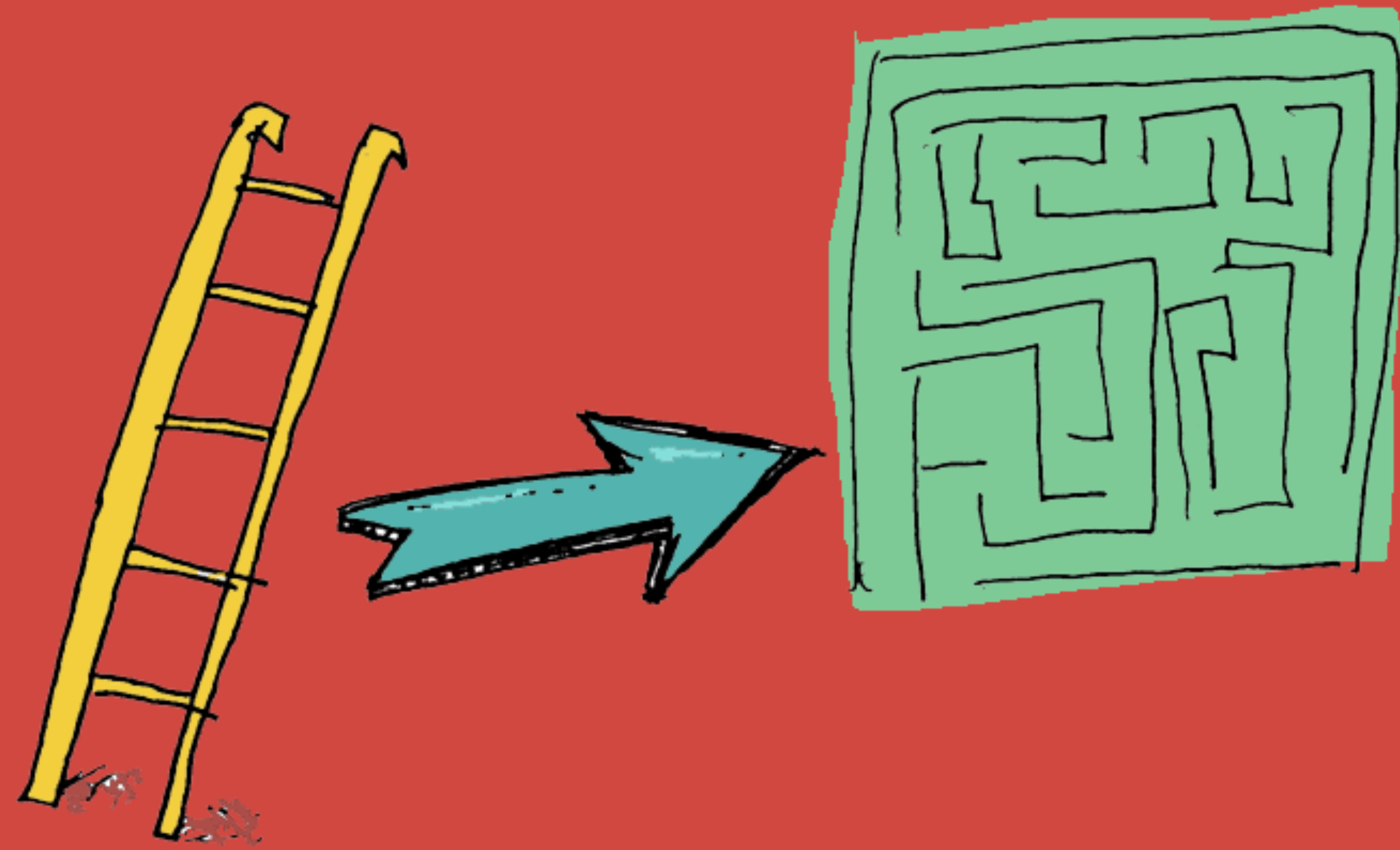
We live in an era where robotics and artificial intelligence will replace many of our current jobs. Global connectivity will continue to allow companies to outsource labor to other countries.



At one time, we could depend on a formula: do well in school, go to college, and climb the corporate ladder.

But things have changed.





THE LADDER IS NOW
A MAZE



The ladder is gone and in its place is a maze. Our students will need to know how to problem-solve and navigate this maze. As automation and artificial intelligence continue, they will need to know how to work within the Creative Economy. They will need to think like engineers and entrepreneurs. Our current students will enter a workforce where instability is the new normal and where they will have to be self-directed, original, and creative in order to navigate this maze.

This might sound terrifying but there's also a hidden opportunity. Our students will have the opportunity to build the future.



BUT THIS REQUIRES PROJECTS.
REAL PROJECTS.
THE KIND THAT STUDENTS OWN.



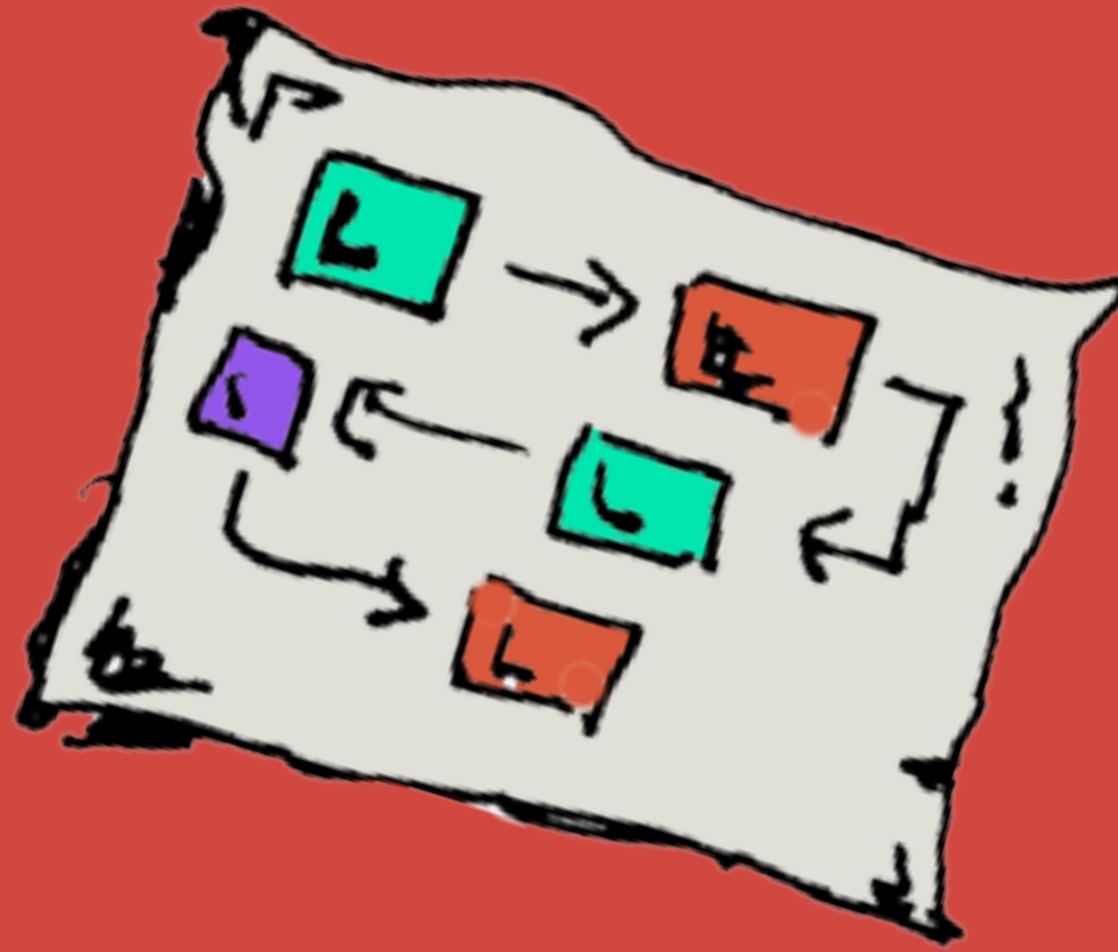
When students engage in project-based learning, they learn how to engage in project management, how to collaborate with their peers, how to design products, how to solve problems, and how to think critically. They are prepared for the Creative Economy while also growing into passionate, life-long learners.

Note that PBL is different from a culminating project, because here students are learning through the project.



ISN'T THIS WHAT WE
WANT FOR OUR STUDENTS?





WHY IS THE "RIGHT WAY" TO DO
PROJECT-BASED LEARNING?



There are many different PBL models out there and you might be feeling a little overwhelmed about the “right way” to engage in project-based learning. What if you do it wrong? What if it’s not “real” PBL? Which framework should you choose?

Here’s the good news: there is no single right way to do PBL. You are the teacher and you know what’s best for your own classrooms. So, try out different models and see what works best for you. Treat it as an experiment.

While there are many different PBL models, there are a few key elements that make up PBL design.



The Buck Institute for Education identifies seven key design elements of project-based learning.

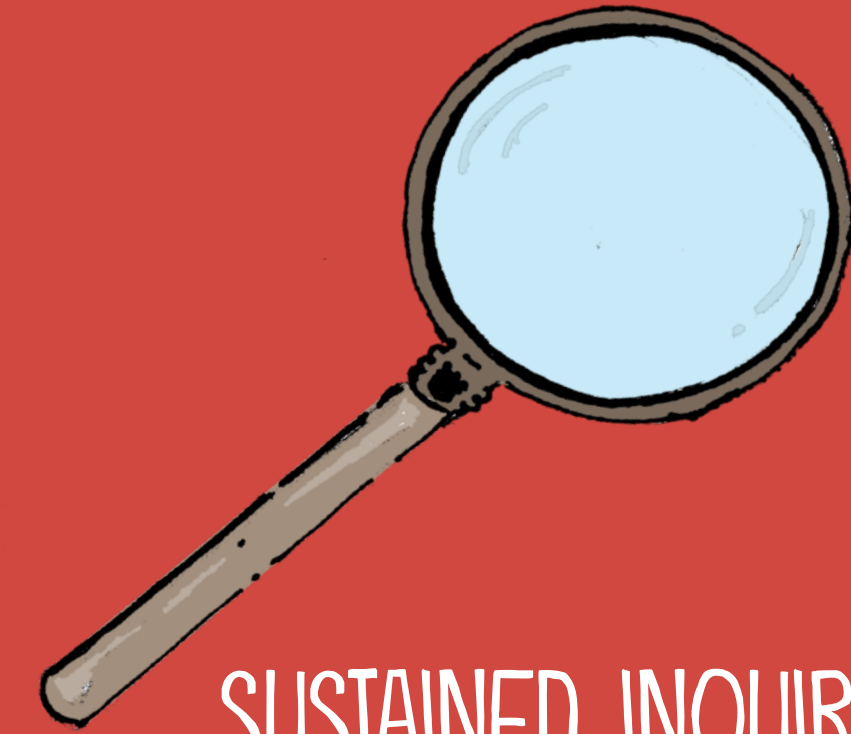
These are the key elements. How you organize it might depend on the timing, the standards, and the subject you teach.



PUBLIC PRODUCT



CHALLENGING PROBLEM
OR QUESTION



SUSTAINED INQUIRY



AUTHENTICITY



CRITIQUE AND
REVISION

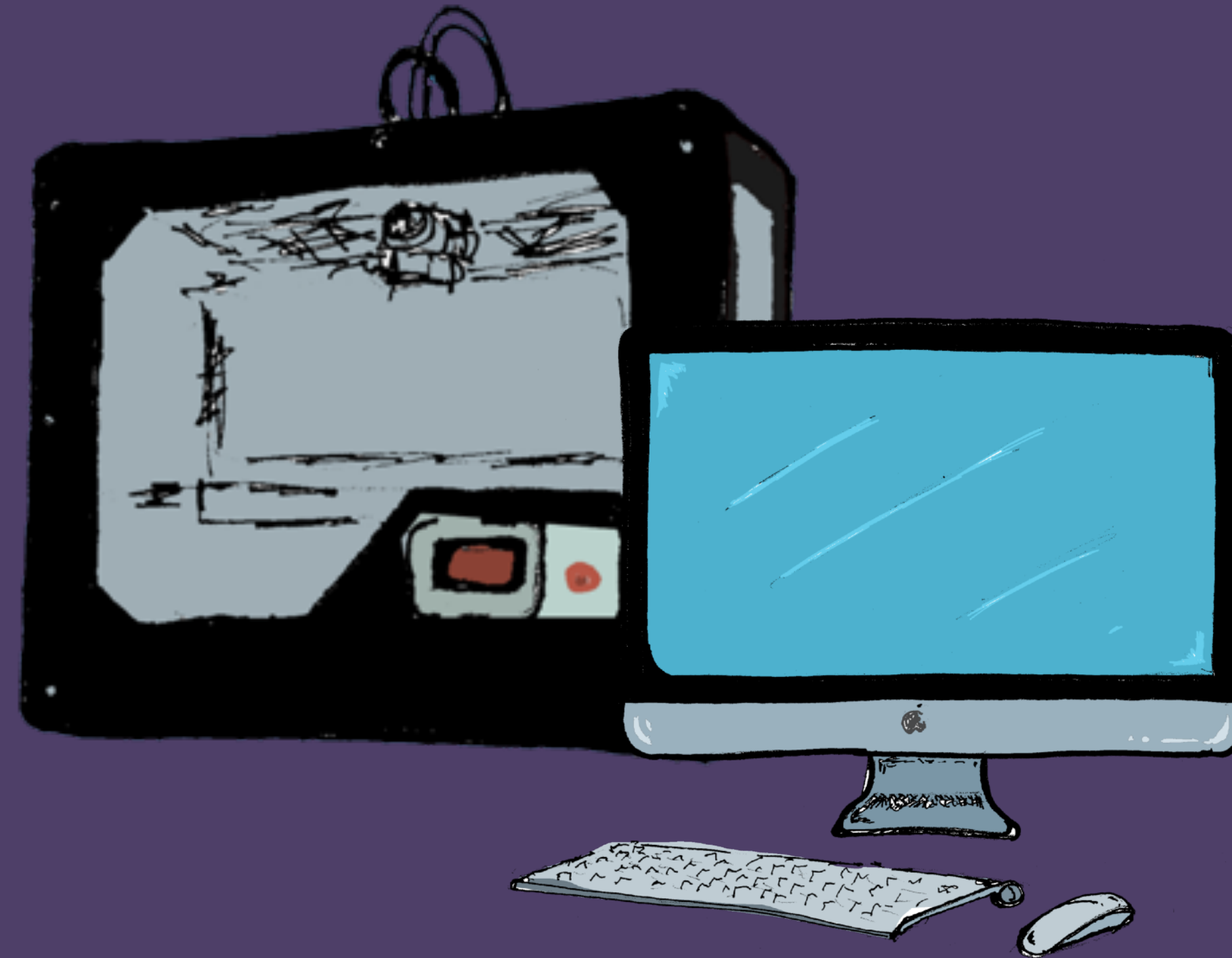


REFLECTION



STUDENT VOICE AND CHOICE

DESIGN ELEMENTS OF PBL



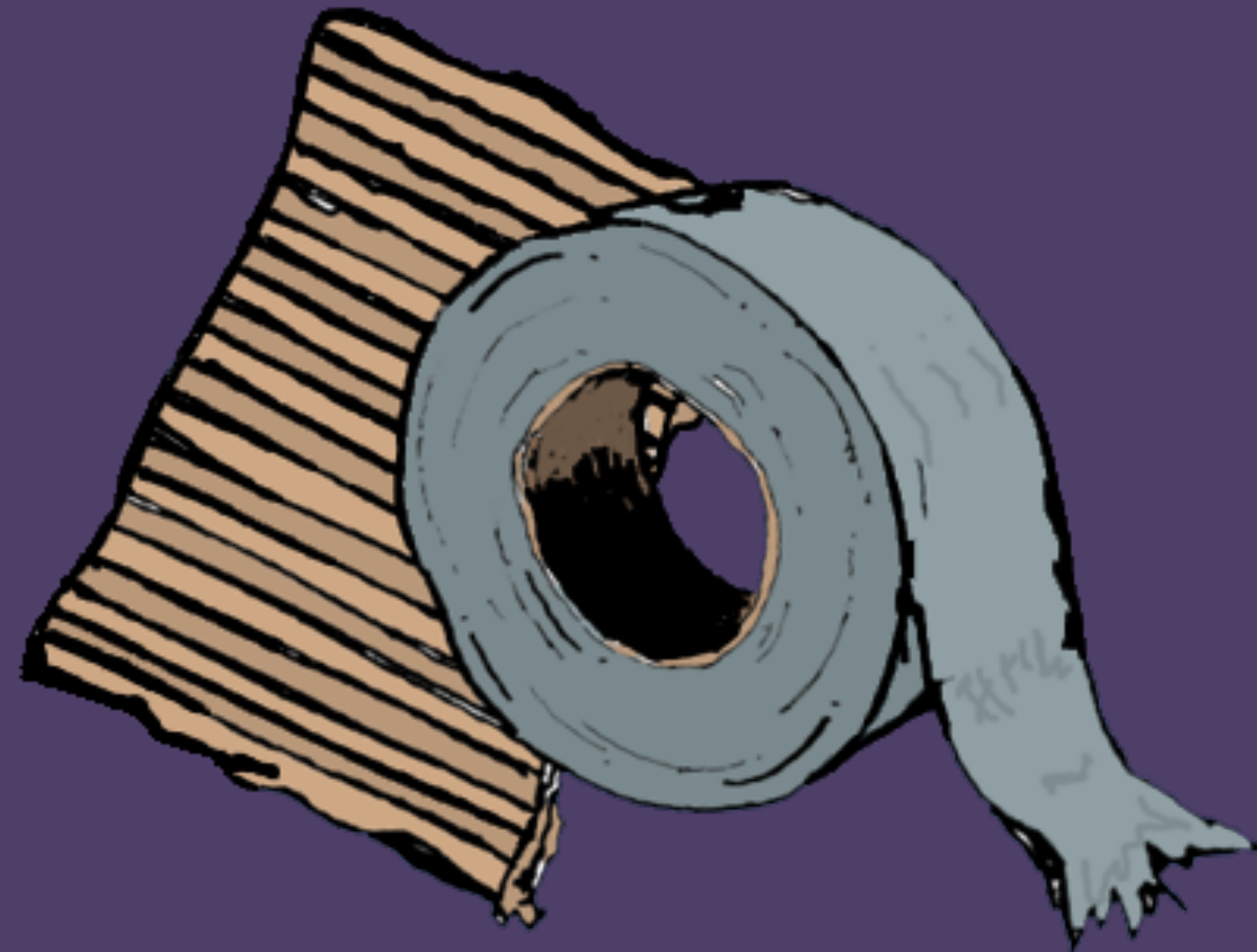
WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE THE BEST
TECHNOLOGY?



The cool thing with PBL is that it's learning driven rather than technology driven. I've seen cool projects where students had 3d printers or one-to-one devices. They used CAD machines to fabricate things they had developed collaboratively.

But I've also seen amazing projects with duct tape and cardboard. I've seen students plan service learning projects or write novels or do photo documentaries with their cell phones. Technology can enhance PBL but sometimes the vintage option is the best option.





OFTEN THE BEST CHOICE IN
TECHNOLOGY IS A
ROLL OF DUCT TAPE



If you look at the resources, I have included specific PBL-centered maker projects that are low-tech. Recently, I had the chance to lead an entire high school in a two-day maker project expedition. By the end of the first day, students were leaving their cell phones in their pockets (or, in some cases, taking snapshots of their low-fi pinball machines). There was something powerful about doing hands-on learning that actually required them to use their own two hands. So, while technology is often a great way to amplify PBL, low-fi options are also a powerful way to increase engagement.





HOW DO I DO P.B.L. AND STILL
TEACH TO THE STANDARDS?



It's easy to remember the highlight reels of the project-based approach I used when I taught eighth grade. I think about the moment we finished our second mural and my students were so excited they started spontaneously cheering or the moment students asked thoughtful questions to our guests during the immigration documentary or the way students continued to surprise me with their blogging projects year after year or the creativity in their STEM-related engineering projects.

But for all the highlights, there are also a string of failures. I've made a ton of mistakes in my PBL journey. Big mistakes. pic mistakes. I designed project-based units that were cringe-worthy; where I had to stop after a few lessons and say, "This was a bad idea. I tried something and it failed. We're going to change this up a bit."



One such project was the Great Linear Equation Debacle of 2011. As an eighth grade self-contained teacher, I wanted to prove that our math block could be fully project-based. After a successful statistics project, I decided we would do a “Linear Equations in Real Life” project. I challenged students to find real examples of linear equations and interview experts who used this skill in their daily life. It tanked. Students couldn’t find enough real examples, much less, experts they could interview. The project felt forced and the end goal was something they didn’t find relevant. To make matters worse, students struggled to determine linear functions while looking at a graph or to solve a linear equation using an algorithm. The bottom line is that the project didn’t fit the standards.



GEEK OUT BLOGS

However, I had more success with our Geek Out Blogs (which are in the webinar resources below). Here, my middle school students had to make sure that their blogs included persuasive and explanatory texts. Here are the two main standards we used.



Why are we fascinated by butterflies, but frightened by moths?



By ISABEL

Posted on February 18

0 Comments



Words: 158

Here's a student example.



Why are we fascinated by butterflies, but frightened by moths?

In my opinion people are fascinated by butterflies and frightened by moths because butterflies have more color and moths are just plain. People just like butterflies by their majestic colors and how they fly but when they see a moth people just get scared and call the moth gross and ugly when it's basically a butterfly with no color. And me myself am a little freaked out when I see a moth even though I know it's harmless and just like a butterfly. But here are some reasons why people don't like moths: They have no color, eat your clothes, are attracted to lights so they fly above your head if there is light above your head. These are some reasons why people like butterflies: colorful, pollinate flowers, butterflies are fun to catch. So why treat moths different just because they eat your clothes, like lights, and have no color doesn't make them any different from butterflies.



IT WAS CHOICE-
DRIVEN BUT ALIGNED
TO STANDARDS



DRIVING STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.



RESEARCH STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.7: Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



WRITING PROCESS STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.5: With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1-3 up to and including grade 8 here.)



PUBLISHING STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.



This project included nearly every single Common Core Writing Standard in the first few weeks of school. Notice, also, how none of those standards mention specific topics. These were all topic-neutral standards, which meant students could choose skateboarding or fashion or history or video games and they're still learning the same standards. As long as they were practicing discreet skills in reading and writing, they could choose their own topics. This was an **interest-driven** approach to PBL.

Our Tiny House Projects, by contrast, required students to master specific conceptual standards with the freedom to use multiple modalities. We combined volume, surface area, and proportional reasoning with standards around budgeting and finance. This was a **problem-driven** approach with a tight focus on specific concepts.

However, when we did our Wonder Day projects, the PBL process was much more **inquiry-driven**. You can find an example of each approach in the resources folder of this toolbox.



DIFFERENT FRAMEWORKS FOR DIFFERENT STANDARDS

Notice in the previous three examples how the types of standards required vastly different approaches to project-based learning. That's not a bad thing. There isn't one single, perfect PBL approach. Sometimes, the best option is an open-ended topical project. Other times, it's more inquiry-based. Still other times, you might choose an empathy-driven design thinking framework. Check out the following table to see the connection between the types of standards you teach and the corresponding PBL approach.



Model	Flexibility of Standards	The Standards-Model Fit
Inquiry-Driven	Flexible Content Standards with Specific Skill Standards	The standards must allow for students to ask their own questions and find their own answers.
Interest-Driven	Content-Neutral Standards with Specific Skill Standards	The standards must allow students to pursue their own interests.
Product-Driven	Varying Flexibility on Content Standards with Specific Skill Standards	The standards must fit within the idea of designing a tangible product.
Problem-Driven	Specific Content Standards (with a Focus on Concept Attainment) with Flexible Skill Standards	The standards must allow students to engage in problem-solving.
Empathy-Driven	Varying Flexibility on Content Standards and Skill Standards	The standards must connect to creative design and empathy with an authentic audience

Note that sometimes you will use a hybrid approach. For example, I have combined elements of inquiry-based learning when I had students do interest-driven PBL. Many of our design thinking projects also had elements of problem-based PBL. And every single PBL approach had elements of product-driven PBL. So, there is always going to be some overlap between the models. However, the key idea here is the word *driven*. What is the key driver in the project your students are working on?

If you're interested in taking a deeper dive into these frameworks, you might want to sign up for the PBL Master Course. Here, we explore specific frameworks you might want to use and walk through each of the steps of creating a PBL unit.





WHAT ABOUT THE TEST?



This was my biggest fear in doing PBL. I was always scared about the test. But, in my experience, our test scores were nearly always toward the top in the district. The key reason is that in PBL, students are more motivated. They are moving from what Philip Schlechty called “strategic compliance” into true engagement. And when that happens, they learn at a deeper level.

Some nuance here. PBL was so different that I used to take a day or two to teach students test-taking strategies and I always felt nervous about it. But that’s why I recommend you start small. Try one project. I’d even choose a low-risk time like the week after state testing or the week before winter break.

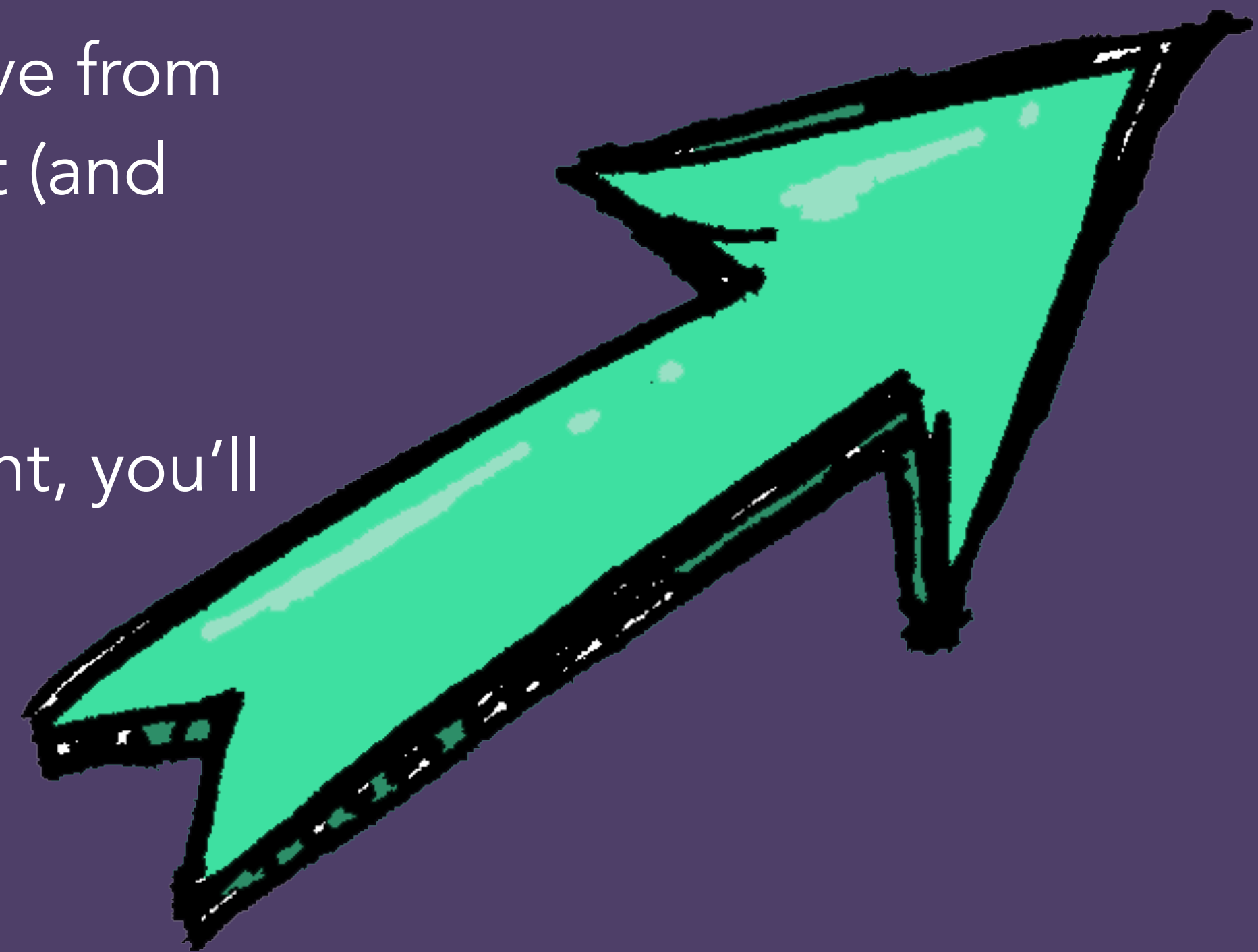
Note, too, that the research on PBL and student achievement is mixed. We cannot say definitely that it will raise test scores — though there is also no evidence that it leads to lower student achievement scores, either.



INCREASES MOTIVATION

PBL is built on the idea that students will achieve at a higher level if they are fully engaged in the learning process. Here, they are able to move from Strategic Compliance into true Engagement (and empowerment)

If you look at Schechty's Levels of Engaement, you'll see how PBL reaches those higher levels.



ENGAGEMENT

STRATEGIC
COMPLIANCE

RITUAL COMPLIANCE

RETREATISM

REBELLION

HIGH ATTENTION

HIGH ATTENTION

LOW ATTENTION

NO ATTENTION

DIVERTED
ATTENTION

ATTENTION

HIGH COMMITMENT

LOW COMMITMENT

LOW COMMITMENT

NO COMMITMENT

NO COMMITMENT

COMMITMENT





HOW DO YOU MAKE TIME FOR
PROJECT-BASED LEARNING?



P.B.L. TAKES TIME

Project-based learning takes time. There's no way around this. So, how do you make time for this when you already have so much on your plate? Actually, PBL isn't about adding something new to your plate so much as re-arranging your plate so that students are the chefs. You still teach the same standards but you are connecting them and creating longer units. Meanwhile, you spend less time doing worksheets, tests, and direct instruction and more time doing inquiry, research, ideation, and prototyping.



PBL CAN ACTUALLY SAVE TIME

Project-based learning has the potential to actually save time in the following ways:

1. Standards are grouped together, so you hit multiple standards with the same task rather than teaching in isolation
2. Students spend more time finding the answers on their own rather than doing direct instruction and guided practice first
3. Assessment happens as you go, freeing up time for testing and test preparation
4. The learning is longer and uninterrupted, meaning you spend less time in transition



RE-ARRANGE YOUR PLATE

Take some time to do a time audit of the wasted tasks that happen in a traditional lesson. How can you cut these things out in a PBL unit?





WON'T CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT
BE A NIGHTMARE?



CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

When I interview PBL teachers, they often describe how scared they were about losing control of their classroom. But what they found is that when engagement increased, management issues decreased. With that said, there are some changes you'll need to think strategically about classroom management. It helps to visualize each part of the project process and make a list of what expectations you'll need to teach your students. This is one of the reasons we included a module in the PBL Master Course that leads you through the creation of a PBL classroom management plan.





HOW DO WE ASSESS IT?



ASSESS AS YOU GO.



We often use the words “give” and “take” to describe assessments. But what if assessment is something you do? What if it’s an embedded part of the process?

In a PBL unit, you don’t need to stop the project to take an assessment. Students don’t need to take a weekly quiz. Instead, they can engage in self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher-directed assessment. This is an opportunity for students to see their own progress, set goals for the future, and determine next steps. The assessment should be happening all over the place. Here, they are judging the quality of their product while also reflecting on the process and determining their mastery of the standards.

If you check out the Assessment Toolkit in the Resources folder, you will find specific assessments you can use to guide you along the way.



SELF-ASSESSMENT

Project-based learning often involves collaborative work. For this reason, it's vital that students get the opportunity to engage in self-assessment surveys, reflections, and rubrics.



The following are some self-assessment options:

- **Tracking Goals:** Students create their own goals. Then they keep track of the progress. It might mean a graph, a progress bar, or simply a description of progress.
- **Self-reflections:** Here students answer reflective questions about what they are learning, where they are struggling, and what they need to do next.
- **Student Surveys:** Sometimes students struggle with open-ended self-reflection questions. Surveys provide a blend of the objective and the subjective. So, they might use a Likert scale, selecting specific words from a bank, or ranking items.
- **Self-Assessment Rubrics:** Students are able to look at the progression from emerging to mastering with specific descriptions in various categories.
- **Checklists:** These can be a powerful diagnostic tool that students use before, during, and after a task.



PEER ASSESSMENT



Peer assessment is a powerful way to prevent groupthink and help groups refine their work. I've included the 20-minute peer feedback system in the Resource folder.



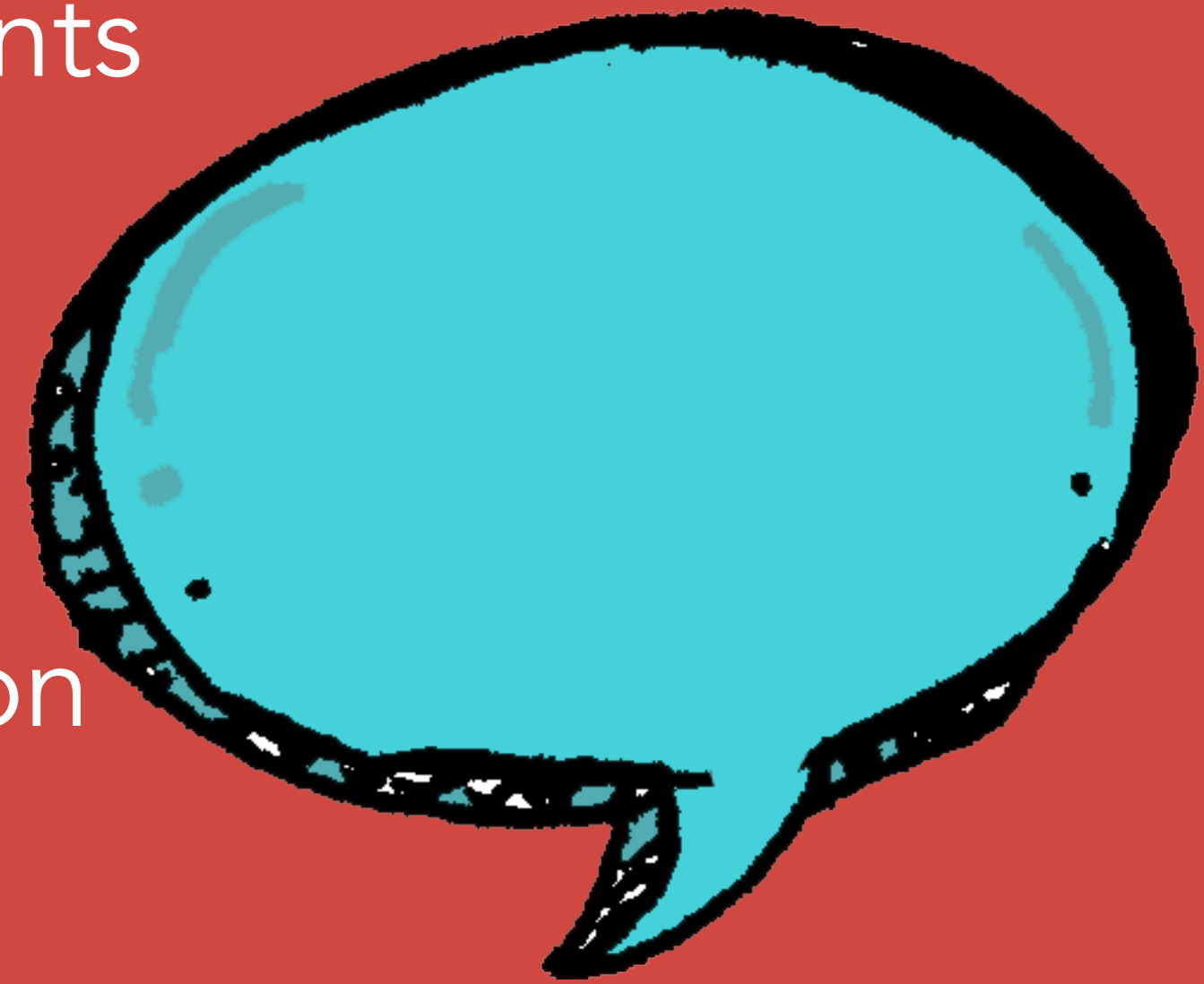
The following are some peer assessment options:

- **The 10-Minute Feedback System:** This critical friends approach begins with one student sharing their work or pitching an idea while the other student actively listens.
- **Structured Feedback with Sentence Stems:** Here, you as a teacher provide specific sentence stems that your students can use to provide diagnostic, clarifying, or critical feedback.
- **3-2-1 Structure:** This is simple. Students provide three strengths, two areas of improvement and one question that they have.
- **Feedback Carousel:** Each group gets a stack of sticky notes and offers anonymous feedback as they move from group to group.
- **Peer Coaching:** Students interview each other about the process, using the coaching questions from the student-teacher conferences to guide them if they struggle to come up with reflection questions.



STUDENT-TEACHER CONFERENCING

One of the best parts of PBL is that students can work independently and you, as a teacher, can engage in one-on-one conferences. This might be coaching conferences, which help students reflect on their learning. Or it might be a consulting conference, where you give students feedback and advice.

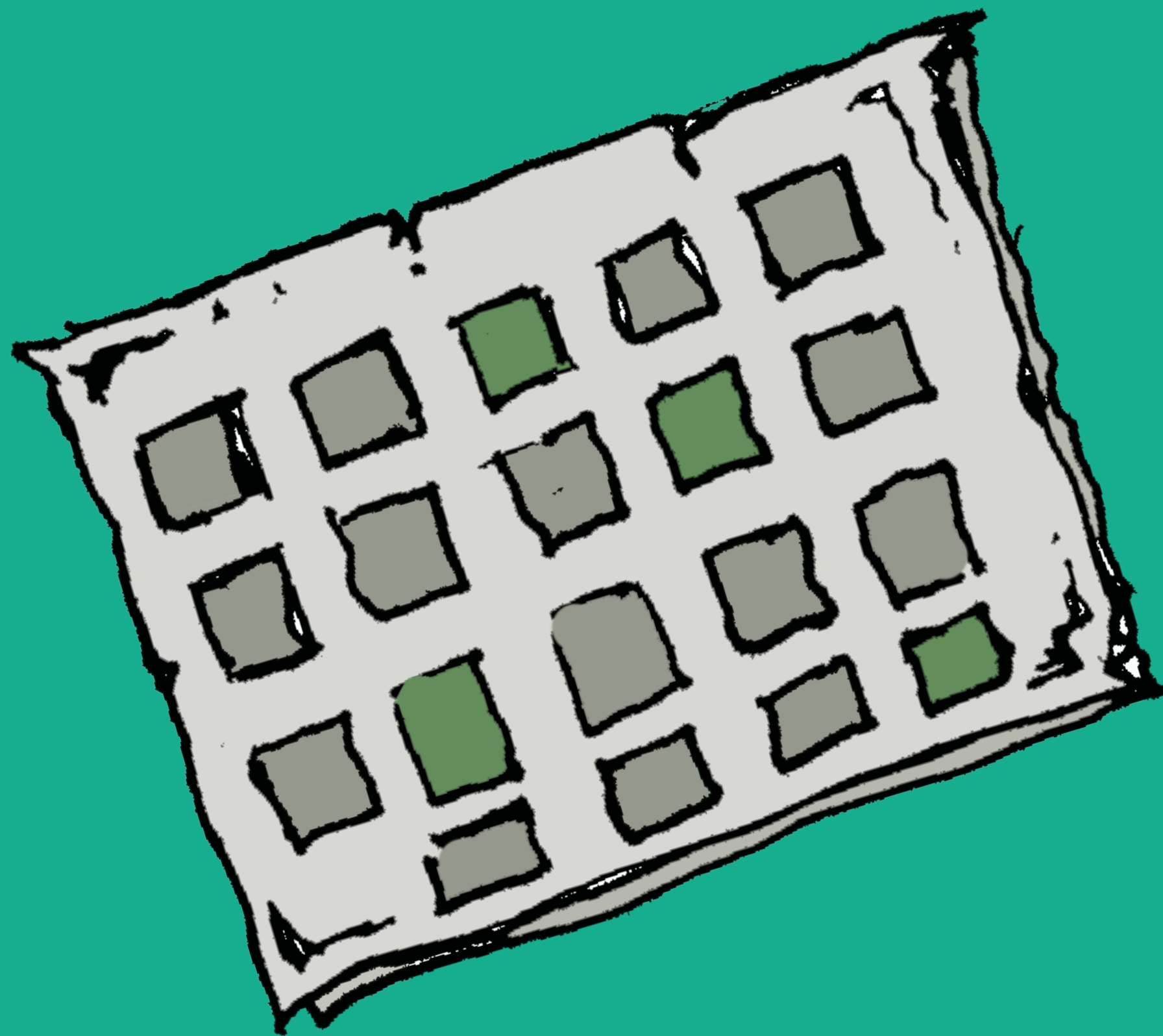


The following are the three types of conferences I have used with students:

- **Advice Conference:** This empowers students to ask for advice. This conference is all about learning specific skills that students are missing. Each student must ask the teacher a series of questions based on an area where he or she is struggling. This is a chance for targeted one-on-one attention and explicit help with a strategy.
- **Reflection Conferences:** This empowers students to reflect on their learning. Instead of telling students what to do, the goal is to draw out student reflection. The teacher uses a series of reflective questions to lead students through the process of metacognition and into the setting and monitoring of goals.
- **Mastery Conference:** Unlike the reflection conference, the focus here is less about reflecting on the process and more about students judging their own mastery of the content. We use the Standards-Based Assessment Grid.

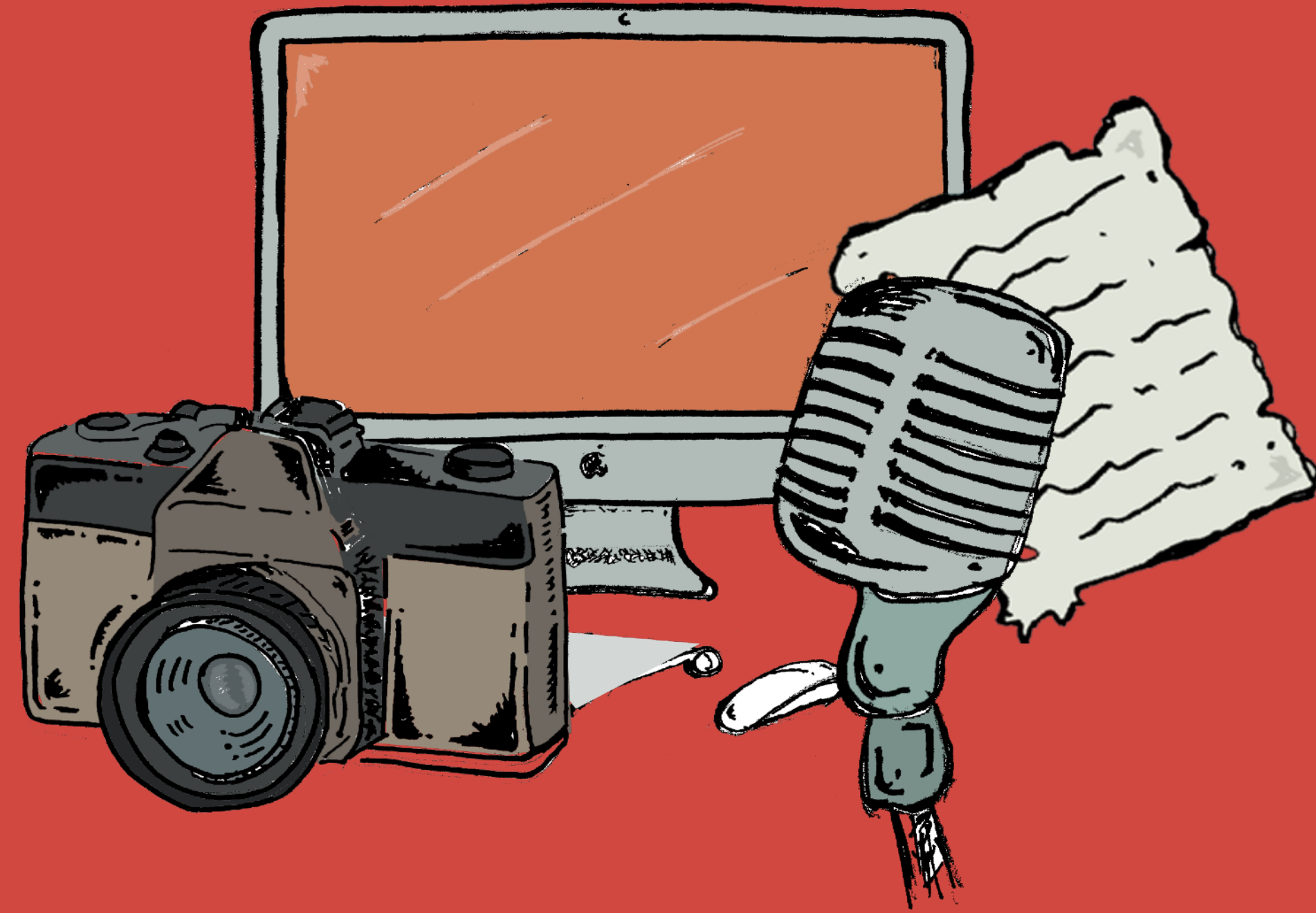


RUBRICS



Rubrics are a pretty normal aspect of teaching, right? But in PBL, you can have students use rubrics as diagnostic tools in self-assessment. It becomes a more authentic, student-centered way to engage in formative assessment.





WHAT ABOUT MY
CONTENT AREA?



When I taught 8th grade self-contained (all subjects), I was initially reluctant to use the PBL approach in math. I had used it in social studies and I could see the tie-in to science and social studies. But then we did the Tiny House project, where students had to use proportional reasoning, scaling, volume, and surface area. I realized that PBL could work in any subject.



PBL isn't limited to one subject area. We've already looked at how the math standards aligned to the Tiny House project and how the Geek Out Blogs hit the ELA standards. I mentioned, too, how my documentary projects connected to social studies.

A key question to ask is, "Where is the creativity in my subject? What kinds of projects do people naturally do in this subject area outside of school?"

It also helps to reach out collaboratively to the people in your department.



BUT IT HAS TO BE
REAL.



Students know when a project is fake. Dan Meyer warns against the idea of “pseudo-context,” when students are doing a project or solving a problem in a way that nobody in the real world actually does.

So, it’s important that you make sure to connect the project to standards that allow students to solve problems and engage in creative thinking. Otherwise, it won’t be real.



LOOKING FOR MORE?

If you're looking for additional ideas, check out the site I created called videoprompts.com. I have maker projects connected to each subject area. I also provide the complete curriculum for a full project in each of the 4 core content areas in the 10-pack of maker projects you get with the PBL Master Course.





WHERE DO I EVEN START?



Start out small. Choose a time period that is low-risk and low-pressure (like the week after testing) and try it out. The following are a few options you might want to check out.



DESIGN THINKING PROJECT



Design thinking is a flexible framework that moves students from awareness into inquiry, research, ideation, and eventually prototyping. I have included two design thinking projects inside the Resource folder in this toolkit.



INQUIRY-BASED PROJECT



Inquiry-based projects begin with student curiosity rather than a teacher-defined problem. They can be a bit simpler than design thinking projects. I have included Wonder Week, an inquiry-based project, inside the Resource folder in this toolkit.



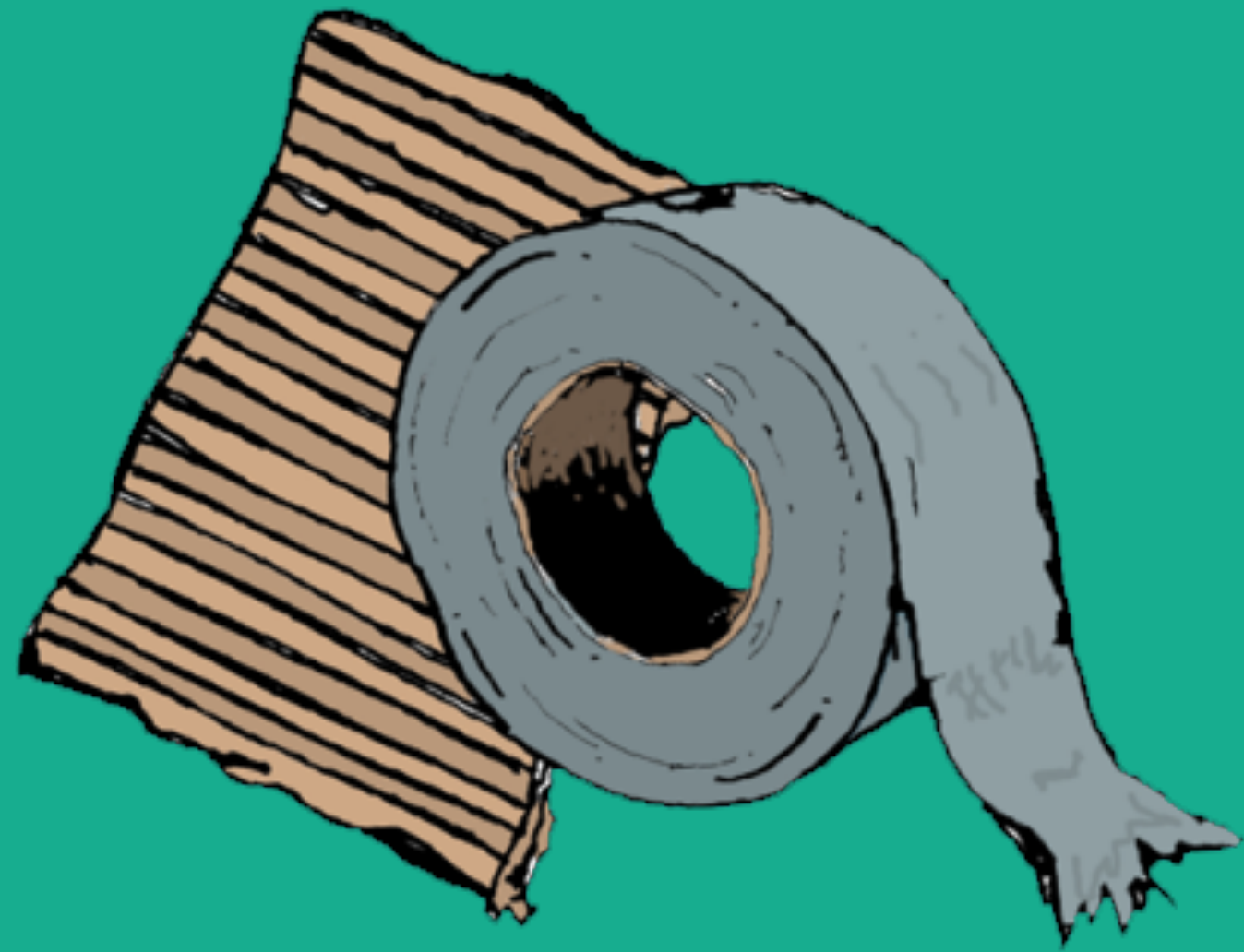
GENIUS HOUR PROJECT



Genius Hour or 20% Time is modeled after the independent project time that Google gives its employees. This allows students to pursue their passions and ultimately create something they send to an authentic audience. I have included a Genius Hour student and teacher video in the Resource folder of this toolkit.

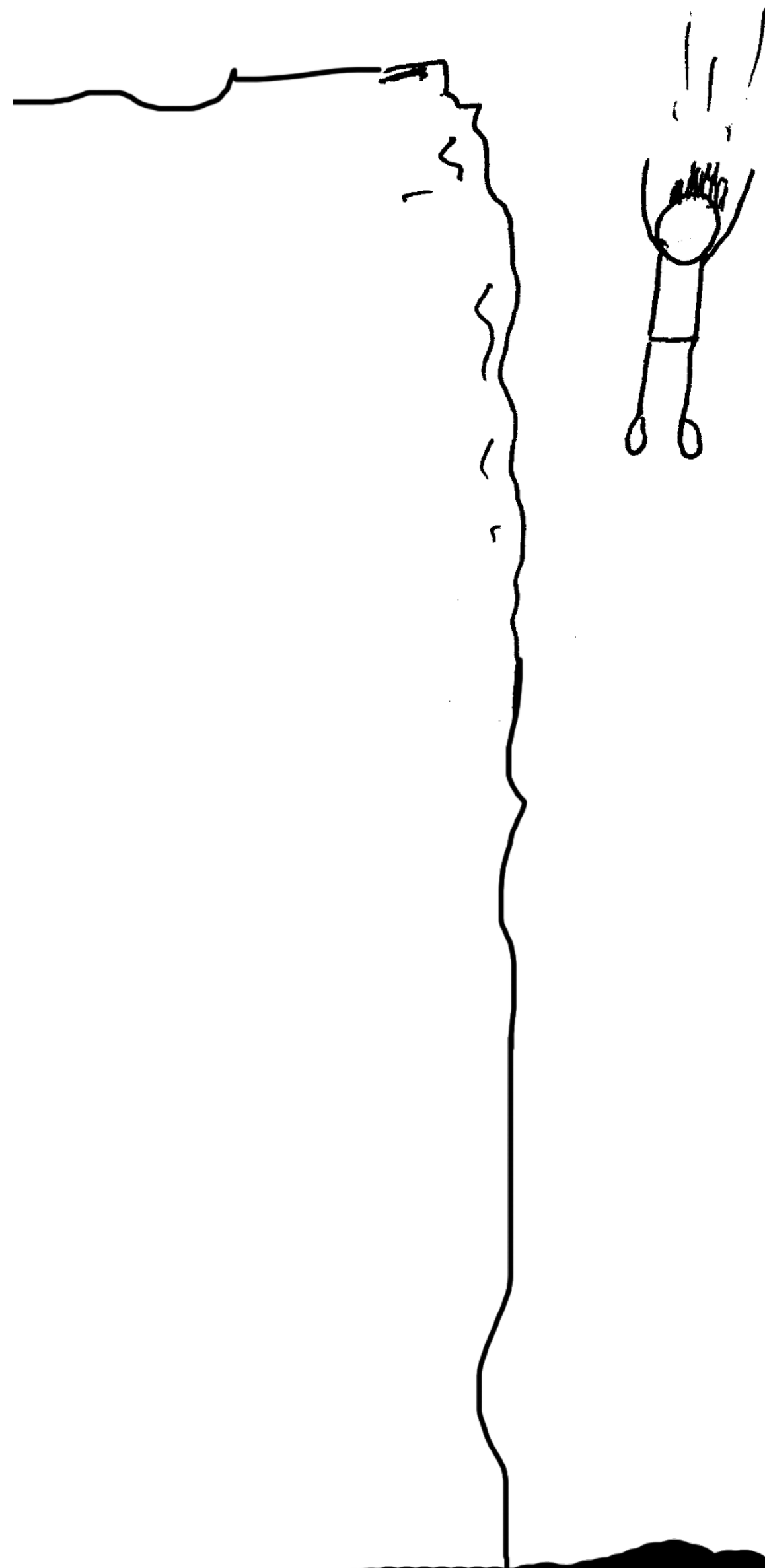


DIVERGENT THINKING PROJECT



A divergent thinking project is a short-term project that forces students to use creative constraint to design something innovative. I have included a Divergent Thinking mini-project inside of the Resource folder in this toolkit.





TAKE THE
LEAP!



YOU MIGHT BE AFRAID
RIGHT NOW.



AND THAT'S OKAY.
(REALLY, IT IS.)



Mrs. Smoot and Mr. Darrow were the reasons I became a teacher. I never forgot that epic experience. And I knew that I was more engaged and learned at a deeper when I learned through a project. However, it took me awhile to embrace a PBL approach.

Don't get me wrong. My students completed projects. However, they were recipes. I chose the end product and reverse engineered it for them with detailed step-by-step instructions. I set tight parameters so they would know exactly what to do. In other words, these weren't projects.

I was doing all the work.

Often, on my ride home from work, I would daydream about doing a PBL unit. But I was afraid. What if the students misbehaved? What if they didn't do their work? What if the groups just talked to each other about football instead of actually collaborating? What would my principal think? How would I possibly connect it to the standards?



I WAS TERRIFIED



MY PRINCIPAL MIGHT
JUDGE ME FOR THIS



THEY MIGHT FAIL THE TEST



I COULDN'T PREDICT WHERE
WE WERE GOING



IT MIGHT NOT
FIT THE STANDARDS



IT MIGHT GET TOO LOUD

THESE WERE
MY FEARS



KIDS MIGHT TALK
THE WHOLE TIME



THINGS MIGHT GET
CHAOTIC



KIDS MIGHT BE OFF-TASK



IT MIGHT TAKE UP
TOO MUCH TIME



STUDENTS MIGHT
STOP WORKING



I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO
TRACK HOW MY STUDENTS WERE DOING



IT FELT LIKE A GAMBLE

THEN EVERYTHING
CHANGED . . .



But this changed on a lame duck testing week toward the end of my second year of teaching. I had the same group of kids for a full week during standardized testing. Instead of watching movies, we decided to do a PBL unit. After a short class discussion, we landed on a documentary project about immigration. Students formed small groups and began researching the topic. I gave mini-lessons on how to conduct interviews, how to shoot video, and how to tell a non-fiction story. I met with students one-on-one to go over how to find more credible sources. We shared scripts back and forth on a shared document.

Things didn't go perfectly. A few students didn't finish their parts. We never launched it to a real audience. Some of my highest performing students were more frustrated and more afraid than ever before. They had never failed like this.

Still, something emerged from the mess.



MY STUDENTS WERE
DIFFERENT.





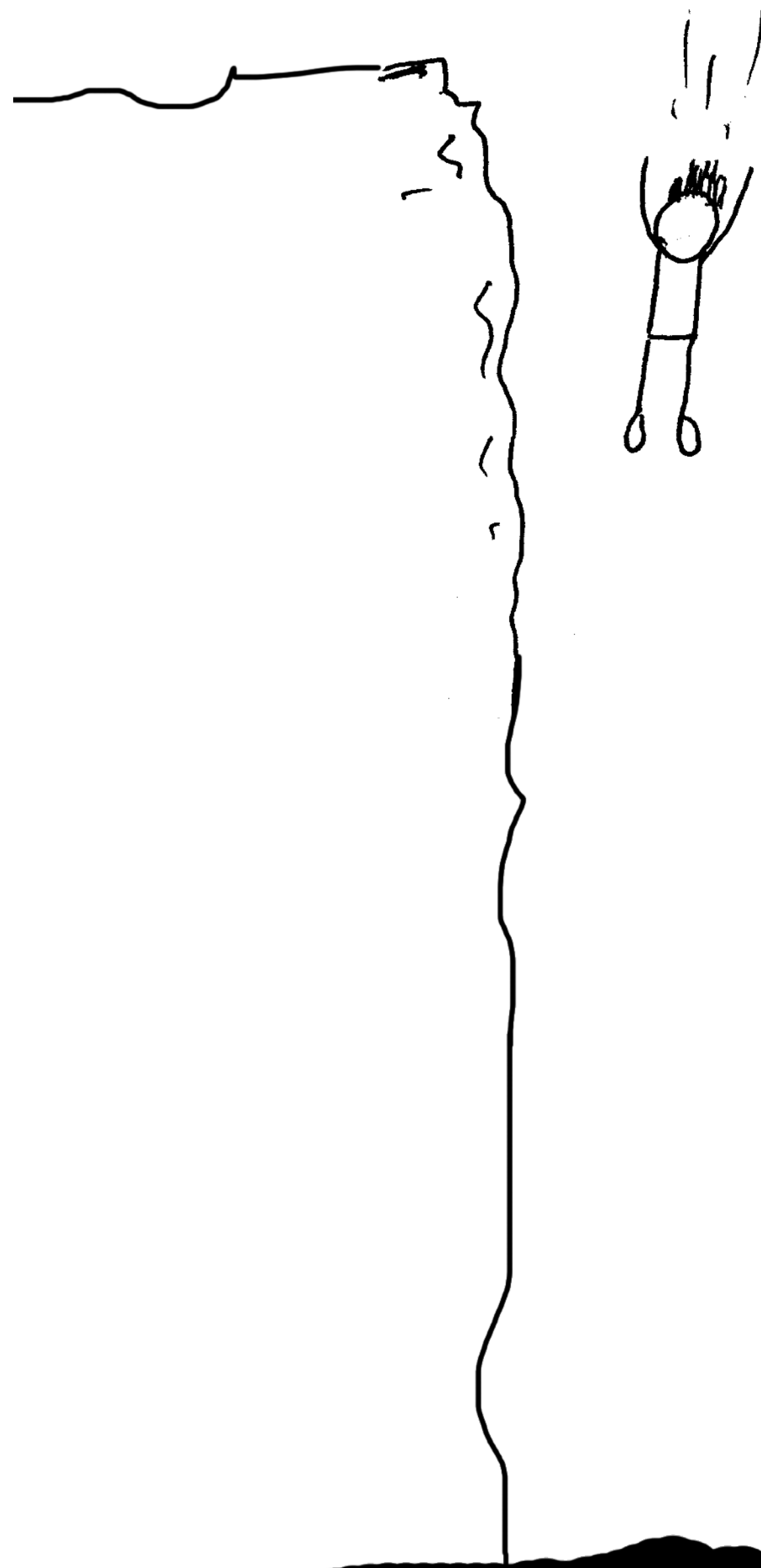
THEY WERE NO LONGER
FOLLOWING RECIPES.
THEY WERE THE CHEFS.



Students who had never turned in homework before began voluntarily shooting videos of interviews with immigrants in their neighborhoods. Students who had never asked questions in class were asking hard-hitting interview questions. Students who had once told me, “I’m not very creative” were setting up storyboards and editing videos. What began as a short, one-week project grew into something bigger, with students coming in before and after school to add to their project.

This was the start of a decade-long PBL journey. It wasn’t always pretty. I had projects that totally tanked and times when we had to regroup and change course. But if you’re thinking about taking the leap, just go for it!





SO, AGAIN,
TAKE THE
LEAP!



TAKE IT TO THE
NEXT LEVEL!

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about project-
based learning?
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at how to
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project-based
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