



## Why Projects?

*A short argument for the project approach in kindergarten teaching and learning.*

In this article, I hope to give you an idea about whether or not you are the kind of teacher who would like to have your students work on projects in your classroom. This article explains **why** I do projects. This article is the theory. My website can give you some ideas about **how** to do projects. My website is the practice. If you agree with the ideas in these few pages, you might like to look at some of my project ideas at [www.teacherjodieblack.com](http://www.teacherjodieblack.com).

“Projects can be incorporated into the early childhood curriculum in a variety of ways. The significant feature is that some time is allocated to experiences in which children make careful observations and inquiries into worthwhile topics over a sustained period of time. The project approach refers broadly to a way of teaching and learning, rather than to a particular set of teaching techniques, or invariable sequences of activities, routines, or strategies. *Engaging Children’s Minds: The Project Approach*, Lilian G. Katz, Sylvia C. Chard, 2000.

On lots of evenings I take a walk around my desert neighborhood. I listen to podcasts of TED Talks on my Ipod as I walk. I feel triply virtuous on these short journeys as I get exercise, enjoy the outdoors and learn a little something new from a TED Talk. TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design. The TED group holds a conference each year in a fabulous location. The best and brightest thinkers of our time come to the conferences and give a thirty minute talk about their latest discoveries, plans and collaborations. TED Talks are about “ideas worth spreading,” the organization claims. Recently I listened to a talk by Jane McGonigal, a computer game designer.

McGonigal had some clever opinions. She claimed that gamers spend in the tens of billions of hours each year playing computer games. McGonigal stated that gamers feel better in games than in real life and that is because in a gaming world the computer never gives you a challenge you can’t achieve. The computer constantly updates your status and gives immediate feedback about your skills. Computer games provide an instant level of trust for collaboration and cooperation with thousands of other gamers. The game scenario is always an epic story. The gamer is saving the world, or even the universe. So in games, McGonigal argues, “we are motivated to do something that matters, inspired to collaborate and to cooperate, become the best version of ourselves,

most likely to help at a moment's notice, most likely to stick with a problem as long as it takes and to get up after failure and try again.”

In another TED Talk, Yochai Benkler, who is an open-source economist, talks about the new level of information sharing that is possible with an internet connected world. He tells a story about how NASA wanted to get some work done on mapping images that had been sent back to Earth from Mars. NASA posted the images and a simple computer interfacing program on the internet and 85,000 amateur astronomers mapped the images faster than NASA could continue uploading them. Further NASA found that the work was as accurate as their own scientists could have done.

I am not a fan of sports. But I happened this season to catch about ten minutes of the basketball final games. I noticed that the eyes of Phil Jackson, the coach of the Lakers, never left the game. Also, he pretty much never stopped talking. I can imagine, although I don't know sports, that he was yelling suggestions, comments, praise and encouragement to his players every single second. In the few minutes of football, car racing, baseball, and Olympic contests I have seen, the coach is always nearby. The coach is always giving immediate feedback to the players of the games. The coach is inspiring players and taking responsibility for the play.

My dad lives on some acres in the Sacramento foothills. He usually keeps a few chickens at the place. My dad mows the lawn every week and dumps the grass in a long-ish hill along the side of the house. Every week, and it takes about a week, the few little chickens scratch at the grass, eating all the bugs, until all the grass is spread out about one blade thick and all the bugs are gone. My father can trust that the chickens will perform the duty to which they are uniquely suited. Just a couple of chickens move thousands of pounds of cut grass and eat millions of bugs, each year, year in and year out.

On occasion there comes a segment of time in my life when all the messages I'm getting are answering the same question for me. The current question is one I have been asking and answering over and over for the 17 consecutive years I have been teaching kindergarten students. What should I be doing with kindergartners that will be the most effective for their learning? Those four previous stories are helping me form an answer.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in America, in Reno, Nevada, in my kindergarten class, I want to be more than a day care provider to my students for their parents. I want to facilitate my students in getting a deep and broad education in skills

and content. But more importantly, I want my students to begin to know how to learn.

Let's start with Coach Phil Jackson. Kindergartners are little. They start school at five, but some at four and they turn six, if we're lucky. Kindergartners are novices at formal schooling. Kindergartners are the rookies of the public school system. Kindergartners, like rookie basketball players, need to have their coach close by. They need to be coached by the coach all day every day. Kindergartners are relying on their coach to tell them when they are doing right, when they are doing wrong, what they can do differently, what they can do better. Kindergartners trust that their coach has their best interests in mind. Kindergartners trust that their coach will help them work within the team effectively. Kindergartners trust that their coach will discern their individual talents and develop those while helping to overcome weaknesses. Kindergartners trust that their coach will know when they can practice alone and when they are ready to be put in the game. Kindergartners want dependent independence and their coach knows that.

Then what about computer games? The students in my class today will spend more and more of their lives tied to technology. But they won't spend too much time tied to technology while in their kindergarten class. How am I making sure that their educational year in kindergarten is preparing them for a technological life? Isn't this what I have always been doing? Do computer games reflect the best of technology back to us? Or do computer games reflect the ways of teaching that have always been effective? Did computer games invent good teaching or do they borrow from good teaching? Think about what Jane McGonigal said about why gamers spend so much time with games. 1) The computer never gives a challenge that can't be achieved. If I am a good coach, I will never give a challenge that can't be achieved. I will give challenges that are hard tests of ability and perseverance, but I will be close by to coach. 2) The computer constantly updates status and gives feedback. If I am a good coach, I will give constant feedback to students about their strengths and weaknesses and will praise their achievements. I will help students recognize when useful learning is happening and how insights are being arrived at. 3) Computer games provide an instant level of trust for collaboration and cooperation between the gamers. While I can't create instant trust, I'd better do it pretty quick. If I am a good coach, I am building my team as a team. We are together, like most teams in a somewhat temporary community with a specific task; learn all we can in kindergarten. The most and best learning is going to happen when everyone feels safe, everyone is contributing and

everyone is working cooperatively. 4) The game is an epic scenario. The universe gets saved. This is the mission that argues for teaching the children through projects. Projects are big. Projects are epic. They can't be tackled alone. While the coach may choose the topic of the project, the students can make it their own epic story each year. The students can learn about how they learn through projects.

The Mars maps mean what? Kindergartners need to learn in a community of learners. They need to be near other kids who are coming at knowledge in some of the same, but in many different ways than they are. Students can cooperate and collaborate and come to new and insightful understandings in a community of support and discovery. Kindergartners, like gamers, and amateur scientists can learn what they are learning in a virtual or real room where everyone on the team is participating in the learning and everyone is contributing to the learning of the whole. When kindergartners have a project to focus on, when the project is big, but the effort is shared, an epic goal can be reached.

This leads to chickens. Kindergarten learning must be little by little. Kindergartners incorporate new knowledge over time. If you are spending a day or week learning about apples, it's unlikely that kindergartners have the time to develop the schema that will retain the new information. Kindergartners need to think and listen and speak and read and write about a topic over and over to own the topic. Learning that happens little by little and over time can be drawn upon in novel situations. Learning that happens little by little and over time can be accessed and applied. Little by little and over time means the teacher has to be present both daily and moment by moment. The teacher has to carefully plan projects that last, build upon previous learning, allow for new learning and encourage multiple avenues of learning. Kindergartners, like chickens, can move mountains if they can do it little by little. Teachers can trust that kindergartners will be curious, questioning, motivated, and active. This is what five year olds are uniquely suited to do.

These four, seemingly disparate ideas about coaching, gaming, collaboration and cooperation, confirm for me that I am doing the right thing in allowing my kindergartners to work in a project atmosphere in my classroom. I want my students to work together. I want them to develop the habits of cooperation that will aid them throughout the rest of their educational lives. I want my students to learn about big topics in a big way. I want them to have a depth of knowledge that can be applied in unique ways to original situations. I want the learning my students do to be new. I want them to learn concepts in a way

that maybe have never been used before. I want the thrill of discovery to be coupled with pride in purposeful effort. I want our classroom activities to mirror the technological world my students are a part of even while the world is becoming virtual and our classroom remains real. I want my students to have time to learn little by little. I want to be there with them. Every day of our short school year, I want to be present to coach. I want to be a good coach. I want us to move the world, little by little.

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