A Step-by-Step Guide to the Best Projects PBL

http://www.edutopia.org/stw-project-based-learning-best-practices-guide

1. **State standards:** Every project at Manor starts with the state standards, and every project's final assessment requires that students demonstrate their mastery of them. State standards are laid out in the rubric, and students should be able to tell you which ones they're covering in any given project.
   * *Example:* For Mobley and Chambers's project, world history standards included understanding the causes of the global depression, the response of governments to it, the rise of totalitarianism, and key world leaders in WWII. English language arts standards included analyzing moral dilemmas across cultures in works of fiction, making complex inferences from literature, and writing personal response essays.
2. **Critical Friends:** Honest, two-way feedback and ongoing adjustments help Manor’s projects to continually improve. Both students and teachers participate in a [peer review protocol](http://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/stw/edutopia-stw-manor-pbl-bestpractices-review.pdf) they call Critical Friends. Before teachers launch a project, they often have a session with colleagues for feedback, especially on the academic rigor of the project. Similarly, before their final presentations, students often run Critical Friends to give each other feedback in the form of "I like…" and "I wonder…" statements and suggest next steps for improvement.
   * *Example:* Mobley and Chambers had a Critical Friends session with their department colleagues in which they received feedback on how to better integrate the two subjects. In this session, they also came up with the idea for the second part of the project, in which the students were broken up into districts and a ruling capital to simulate both the fictional and historical scenarios they were studying.
3. **Entry event:** Teachers introduce each project with an [entry event](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlXI-s-RpXw&feature=youtu.be) that serves several purposes: to hook the kids and get them engaged in the content, to provide an exemplar of what the teachers expect, and to introduce key vocabulary (such as people, events, and terminology) related to the targeted content to get the students thinking about what they'll need to know.
   * *Example:* For the Controlling Factors entry event, Mobley and Chambers created a newsreel that included terms like "Mussolini," "totalitarianism," "global depression," and "World War II" as breadcrumbs. A student might already know what totalitarianism and World War II are, but may not know who Mussolini was and how those terms are all connected.
4. **"Need-to-know" list:** Keywords in the entry event should prompt students to identify new concepts they’ll need to learn and help them make connections to related content they already know. As a class, they agree on a shared list of need-to-knows, which they update individually throughout the project.
5. **Rubric:** [The rubric](http://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/stw/edutopia-stw-manor-pbl-bestpractices-rubrics-controllingfactor.pdf) is an essential tool for maintaining transparency for students at Manor. [Teachers carefully design rubrics](http://www.edutopia.org/stw-project-based-learning-best-practices-resources-lesson-plans#rubrics) to define all the desired [learning outcomes](http://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/stw/edutopia-stw-manor-pbl-bestpractices-culture-learningoutcomes.pdf) for a project, including which state standards students are expected to master and how performance will be measured for each outcome. The rubric sets the standard for each project and is presented at the start so that students have clear goals to work toward.
6. **Group contract:** Individual accountability is a critical component of successful PBL, and Manor students use [group contracts to document expectations](http://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/stw/edutopia-stw-manor-pbl-bestpractices-groupcontract.pdf) for each team member. Each project team writes a contract that clearly defines everyone's roles, responsibilities, and contributions to the project, and students are held to it. Students can be fired if they do not fulfill their part of the contract and must complete the project on their own, although this rarely happens at Manor.
7. **Research and collaboration:** Once the project is launched, it is up to the students to work together to figure out what their final product is going to be and how they will acquire the knowledge they need to complete it. Teachers provide workshops to go over concepts depending on students' needs, and they have students run workshops for each other to reinforce their learning and build collaboration.
   * *Example:* [Workshops for *The Hunger Games* project](http://www.edutopia.org/stw-project-based-learning-best-practices-resources-lesson-plans#workshops) included student-led discussions about real moral dilemmas from events in history or fictional examples based on events in the book. They also had workshops on different totalitarian leaders and other world leaders during WWII.
8. **Assessment and adjustment:** Throughout the process, teachers and students give and receive feedback and make adjustments accordingly. Teachers track student progress to make sure no student is falling behind. Depending on what they find, they might go back and do more scaffolding, quiz more, or provide additional workshops. "If I have a student who is almost done with an entire project and is not doing very well," says Mobley, "I really step back and wonder, 'Where was I this whole time? Why wasn't I paying more attention to the student's progress?'"
9. **Presentations:** Public presentations are the common element to all projects at Manor, with up to 80 percent of them in front of an external audience. Verbal communication, public speaking, and other important nonacademic skills are honed in this process.
   * *Example:* Final presentations for Mobley and Chambers's project included a multimedia presentation with audience participation about a moral dilemma faced by Nazi concentration camp survivors and a skit dramatizing the moral decisions made by world leaders running up to the attack on Pearl Harbor.
10. **Final assessment:** Because teachers take pains to observe student progress throughout the process, the final assessments tend to be relatively easy. The work up front on creating a clearly defined rubric that identifies multiple learning outcomes and criteria also helps considerably. As Mobley explains, "By the time students turn in their final work, they should know what grade they're going to get."