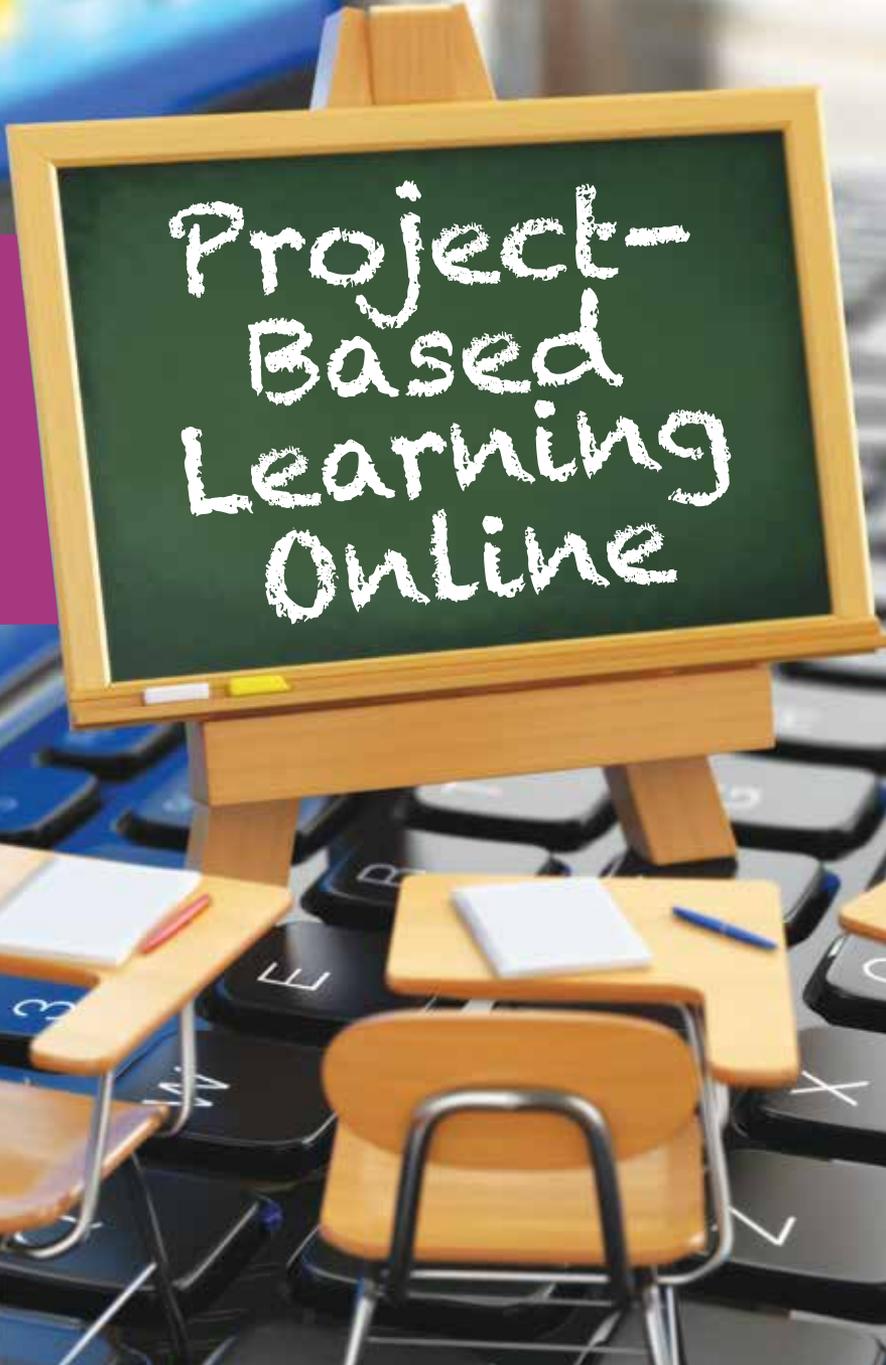


BY LEE GOHMANN

Providing online students with the same opportunities as in-school pupils using experiential learning, feedback and reliable assessment.



Project-Based Learning Online

Today's students value experiential learning over lecture-based formats.

Project-based learning (PBL) is a dynamic approach to teaching in which students explore real-world challenges by being given a variety of projects designed to enhance the course and enrich their understanding of the content. PBL should not be considered as a supplement to learning but as the basis of the curriculum. It is student driven, guided by the teacher and teaches concepts via a project. The students must be active participants, and their participation begins with an inquiry question that drives the research. Creating projects that are complex and offer authentic activities can help the learner engage in relevant problem-solving of real-world situations.

It is critical that funeral service students identify social sit-

uations in which they will have to operate, develop creative solutions within financial and familial constraints, and implement those solutions in a timely manner. PBL allows them to explore these real-world problems and challenges with role-playing activities, hands-on creative projects and presentations. This is typically done in large part in a classroom or lab setting. The challenge is in moving these projects into an online project-based learning environment while not impacting the reliability of assessment. Students develop projects individually or in groups, accomplish measurable goals and feel empowered by meeting their objectives.

Mortuary science colleges offering 100% online degrees are particularly challenged with providing their online students similar opportunities as face-to-face students to interact with course content and to ensure that the online experience is more engaging than simply reading a text with

accompanying PowerPoint slides and taking timed exams.

Implementing project-based learning into an online environment can address that challenge and be very beneficial to students. While funeral service programs can be completed online without PBL, typically comprising discussion boards, reading and timed exams, students miss out on the experience of completing a project either individually or as part of a team and are deprived of vital interaction.

Educational theorist John Dewey felt that the best way to learn was not the traditional method of transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. Rather, Dewey proposed using active experiences that prepare students for ongoing learning in an ever-changing world. Many innovative instructors are taking project-based learning out of the physical classroom and moving it into the online classroom. Research studies have shown that students are more engaged in their learning process when they are creating and completing projects. In doing so, students learn a number of life skills, such as time management, responsibility, problem-solving and collaboration when the project involves other students.

Even when working collaboratively on a group project, the expectation is that each member of the group will be an equal participant. Personality, intelligence, knowledge, thinking style and motivation correlate in the formation of a creative person. Creativity itself is complex by its very nature, and the challenge is to find a strategy that can influence and expand this creativity. Indeed, this is one of the basic tenets of PBL.

Project-based learning is an interdisciplinary method of

knowledge in ways meaningful to them. When students see connections in their learning experiences, their learning becomes more lasting.

It's important for students to understand their responsibilities and expectations with regard to a project. They are more likely to have a positive learning experience when the projects are structured into attainable milestones, and adult learners in an online class are motivated when they are able to apply learning to solving problems that directly relate to their professions.

Furthermore, adult learners have an overall positive perception of peer feedback with regard to their performance in project-based learning. While peer feedback can facilitate learning, the drawback is that peers may not always provide constructive criticism. A great deal of the positive aspects of peer review is the amount of participation and the quality of the actual feedback process. PBL can cultivate problem-solving capacities of students and might be reflected through communicating with others, reflection, collaborative learning and working to produce a group product. It is increasingly used as a teaching and learning method in higher education to promote knowledge-building through social interaction. Students display different levels of self-regulation when learning in an online environment; online coursework requires that students be self-motivated and behaviorally active.

Education in funeral service is structured so that it must have clearly identified learning goals that can include a struc-

With project work, students learn life skills: time management, problem-solving, collaboration.

analyzing real-life problems within their natural settings, giving students the opportunity to design their own product within the parameters of the class. Students are directed to form an inquiry, formulate a problem, develop solutions and reach results. It allows students to gain knowledge by seeing, analyzing, writing, participating and sharing the new knowledge with their peers. Creating projects that are complex and offer authentic activities can help the learner engage in problem-solving relevant to their real-world situations.

Engagement with peers can be instrumental to meaningful learning. By encouraging such interaction, instructors help students develop critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the process. Assessment is an important part of project-based learning but is not a one-and-done process, especially when students are completing a project. It is a continuous cycle. It identifies what students are to learn, provides them with the opportunity and materials in the form of content to learn those things and then assesses whether they have learned them. Teachers should regularly evaluate the instructional strategies being used, along with the types of assessment used in order to optimize students' content knowledge and how they acquire it. Using alternative assessment strategies, such as allowing students to choose between assignments, would encourage them to showcase their

tured learning program, community service and personal reflection. This framework should facilitate growth, leadership, communication skills and commitment to service. Students develop projects individually or in groups, accomplish measurable goals and feel empowered by meeting their objectives. Learning objectives could be self-identified or defined by the instructor. Examples of projects could include presentations, critical inquiry for professional organizations and measurable community service activities.

When studying for a human services profession, students often rely on interaction between each other to advance critical thinking. Students should be required to become active participants in their class. Another challenge that can be confronted in the online class is the diversity of student backgrounds relative to the subject being taught or the program itself.

In project-based learning, teachers act as facilitators and are there to provide strategic instruction. This can be done in a number of ways, including solid content knowledge, the ability to set clear goals and expectations, being able to anticipate difficulties and provide flexible leadership, and a willingness to support students as needed. The instructor in a PBL environment must have a positive and encouraging approach to set the tone, as good teaching transcends methodology.

There will be challenges in moving to an online format. In an online class, the student must be engaged in the learning process. There are 13 colleges in the United States that offer online mortuary science programs, either through hybrid programs or completely online. As part of the requirement for mortuary school graduates, the American Board of Funeral Service Education calls for students to take part in embalming 10 bodies. This requirement could easily be included as part of an overall project that would require substantive reporting and a final proficiency embalming procured by a preceptor.

al hours to several days. That can seem an eternity to a struggling student. However, introverted students may find that online classes can provide a learning environment more conducive to their style of learning. Outgoing students may find the online environment more challenging. A positive aspect of the online classroom is that allows for increased equity. No one student can dominate an asynchronous discussion; all learners have an opportunity – and a requirement – to reflect and respond.

The core idea of project-based learning is that real-world problems capture students' interest as they acquire and apply

Learning in an online environment requires that students be self-motivated and behaviorally active.

An asynchronous online course built on a PBL foundation must be deliberately created with clear expectations for discussion forums, project design and submission, and overall layout. It is important to remember, however, that students need more than a computer screen or electronic textbooks. They need that human connection and that personal interaction a teacher brings.

Project-based learning instruction needs to be specific; otherwise, we risk having it open to interpretation. A synchronous discussion would be ideal. This would allow for questions to be posed and answered, and there could be a question that benefits another student who hears the answer. Next, there has to be some type of assessment to determine the success of the projects. It is critical to determine whether the student really learned something from it. There needs to be a piece that ties back to things that are relevant in the class and the profession that will help them become better funeral directors.

In a traditional class, communication is face to face. In the online class, communication can be delayed from sever-

al hours to several days. That can seem an eternity to a struggling student. However, introverted students may find that online classes can provide a learning environment more conducive to their style of learning. Outgoing students may find the online environment more challenging. A positive aspect of the online classroom is that allows for increased equity. No one student can dominate an asynchronous discussion; all learners have an opportunity – and a requirement – to reflect and respond.

The core idea of project-based learning is that real-world problems capture students' interest as they acquire and apply new knowledge in a problem-solving context. Students must ask questions, do research and employ critical thinking in order to create the solution. They are constructing their own knowledge rather than just reproducing facts. Many times, this includes equal collaboration with classmates. As we are challenged by funeral professionals to provide high-functioning graduates, by implementing PBL online, our school's program provides an academically challenging curriculum that includes attention to the development of higher-level cognitive skills. It is important to deliver the content in a variety of ways – through lecture, group projects, discussion and outside research. By mixing it up and letting it get messy, everyone has the chance to learn. If successful, many students will go on to careers that will enable them to provide compassionate service to grieving families. ☰

Louise "Lee" Gohmann is a faculty member at Mid-America College of Funeral Service and a funeral director and embalmer licensed in Indiana and Florida. She has been a funeral service professional for more than 16 years.



A.C. Furniture offers custom furniture such as wing back chairs, sofas, benches, stacking chairs and occasional tables in a wide range of fabrics and finishes.

AC FURNITURE
Americas top source for funeral home seating!

A.C. Furniture Company, Inc.
276-650-3356 • www.acfurniture.com