

An Introduction to the Project Approach: How and Why Front Porch Series Broadcast Call

Dr. Micki Ostrosky: Good morning or afternoon, everyone. This is Micki Ostrosky from the University of Illinois, and I am hosting the Front Porch Series today for Gail Joseph. I am pleased to introduce Sallee Beneke – Dr. Sallee Beneke, who is an associate professor of early childhood education at St. Ambrose University in Iowa. She is our presenter today.

Sallee teaches courses in typical and atypical development, early childhood curriculum, and early childhood methods. She is a frequent presenter at state and national conferences on the Project Approach, which is the topic of today's conversation. And she's authored or co-authored four books and written numerous articles on the Project Approach, as well as on documentation of children's learning. And last year, in 2013, Sallee was selected for the distinguished – for one of the distinguished alumni awards that was presented through the College of Education at the University of Illinois.

So I'm really thrilled to have Sallee – that she agreed to present with us today. And the topic of her – or the title of her talk is called, An Introduction to the Project Approach: How and Why. So Sallee, take it over.

Dr. Sallee Beneke: Thanks, Micki. And hi, everyone. I'm so excited to be here and share a little bit about the Project Approach with you. And I have a lot to share, so I'm going to get going. First, I want to talk about what is a project for those of you who aren't familiar with it. It's really, in a nutshell, an extended, in-depth investigation of a topic, and ideally a topic that's worth learning more about. We could probably spend an additional half-hour just talking about what makes a good topic, but I hope you'll get some sense of that from the presentation today.

So there's typically one project taking place in a class of preschoolers. With older children, you might be able to have many projects taking place among different groups. But with preschoolers, it's typically one overall project; although some different small groups of children might have an interest in different subtopics. So my plan here is to show you the story of one project in depth, and it's an old project where I was actually the classroom teacher. But I'm also going to show you some examples that are interspersed from other, more contemporary projects in other teachers' classrooms.

So I'm going to share the car project, which was implemented in my classroom at a rural Midwestern community college in the '90s. So let's begin. The key features of a project are that it is an investigation of something real. And during the course of this project, children, because they're engaged in the process, begin to formulate questions. And the teacher supports them so that they can begin to collect information and find answers to their questions. Another key feature is that a project is conducted over an extended period of time. So that could be two weeks or that could be three months, depending on how rich the topic itself is.

So the car project started in my classroom, as I said. And I had been hired there as the master teacher for the year and I had redone the environment. And I had brought in the Project Approach and authentic assessment, and things about the environment from Reggio Emilia. And I was, you know, very, very busy and had student teachers under me as well.

So over my winter break, I sat and went through the children's portfolios. And I came to realize that I really didn't know this one little boy very well, and I felt – I felt really bad about that. How could I have spent every day with him and feel like I just didn't know him? His name was Taylor, and he was a child who was very compliant, never any trouble, always came to circle time or did whatever I asked of him. He played by himself all the time; didn't get in arguments.

Have you ever had... Think for a minute. Have you ever had a child like that in one of your classrooms? I am imagining many of you have, because there are some children who demand a lot of our attention and I think sometimes children like Taylor go by the wayside. So what I decided to do was to get to know him a little bit better. So I decided to try and start a project that would interest him. And Taylor was really fascinated with machines, and he always had little motorcycles or cars in his pockets. He loved Army guys. And here you see him on the first day back from break holding his Army guy. And he's wearing his camo. [Laughter]

But projects don't always start because of one child. In fact, there are lots of ways they can start. For example, this is a project on houses that went on quite a while, and it began because the class had been reading and then acting out the story of "The Three Little Pigs." So some of the key events in the life of a project, or the how-to, things that happen, are the anticipatory web, the opening event, revisiting past experience, messing around with the topic, and asking questions. And I'm going to show you some examples now of all of these key events. I also want you to notice, on the left, there's a project I'm going to share with you on the mail truck.

And that project began – because it emerged from earlier work in which children had been building mailboxes for each classroom for each teacher. So this was one of the mailboxes that was placed outside a teacher's door. So here is an example of the anticipatory web. And of course, when I actually made it – or we actually made it, we started with Post-its, and then we organized and reorganized our Post-its, and then we took a marker and drew lines. So we didn't start out typing it and making it look quite as organized as it really is.

But the idea of an anticipatory web is that when you know you're going to do a project on something like cars or houses or the mail truck, you and the other adults who are going to be facilitating the project think about all the things there are that the children might learn. What is there to know about cars? Well, so, you know, we actually have a little cluster on the glove compartment, what's under the car, what's under the hood, the lights. Once you start thinking about these things, you come up with many, many, many more than you thought might be associated with the topic. And as you do this, you become aware of materials you might want to gather and guest experts you might want to invite and experiences you might want to have the children have. So if you think you have a topic that the children are likely to be highly interested in, it's worth your time to take an hour or so and do this.

So, if the project is teacher-initiated, like in the case of the car project when I decided I was going to start a project on this topic, you have to think of a way to open the discussion with the children. So what I decided to do was to bring my car in for repair in the automotive lab that was right down the hall from us. And I neglected to say this earlier, that the early childhood center, or lab school, where I was working shared a building with an automotive lab. And one of the reasons that we decided to do this project on cars was that Taylor was interested in machines, and down the hall from us was this huge lab full of people doing hands-on work with car repair and putting them up and down on lifts and things like that.

So what I did was explain to the children that there was something wrong with my car and I was bringing it in for repairs. And they immediately then, of course, chime in and start to tell things that have happened in their lives or in their world with cars. So Emma says the battery went dead on her car. And Chase says the motor wouldn't work on ours; and Kelsey says if you run over a pothole in the road, the wheels might get out of air. Mary said it won't go without gas, and Emma said the horn might run out of batteries. And Megan said if you go real fast, the wheels will break.

And this first web that you make with kids typically reflects their understandings and their misunderstandings. So all these things that the children have said in this particular web are accurate, but I also did a web with children on the meadow on crickets. And they said that crickets lived in a bedroom, crickets had breakfast; they have fried eggs on Sunday morning. Basically, they didn't know very much about crickets, so they didn't have much to offer, so they sort of made some things up.

Anyway, I can tell that Chase knows cars have motors. Emma knows cars have batteries. Kelsey knows there is air in tires, which is pretty advanced, and she was one of the older children in the class. But look at Taylor's: "It couldn't start when it always goes places." It couldn't start when it always goes places. So we sort of know what he means, but we can tell that he's not clear, that he has difficulty articulating his ideas. And when children have difficulty communicating, they find fewer peers that are willing to stop and listen to them. Therefore, they often have fewer opportunities to communicate.

So there's sort of a cycle that begins that's self-perpetuating. Lilian Katz would call this a recursive cycle. And she reminds us that one of the important jobs we have as preschool teachers is to find ways to break these cycles. Here's an example of a similar web from the project on the mail truck. And you can see checks that the teacher has put on here, and I believe that those checks indicate that these are pieces that they have finished constructing as they're making their mail truck.

Another key event in phase one is giving kids opportunity to represent past experience. So, here is Marissa's car; she called this her carrot car. So take a minute and look at her carrot car and see if you can tell some things that Marissa knew by looking at her car. Well, you can probably tell if you look over here on the right that she knows cars have a license plate; and she asked the assistant teacher to write the numbers on there. And you can see that it has windows, you can see it has a bumper. This may be another license plate back here; I don't know. This pointy stuff on the front was a grill. And you'll find that children have special, individual interests during projects; and throughout this project, Marissa continued to be interested in the grills on cars.

I hope you notice down here on the tire that there's some writing. And it's amazing how many opportunities we find for children to apply what they know about literacy or math in the context of a project. The Project Approach is not the whole curriculum. It's not a substitute for intentionally teaching children math or intentionally teaching them literacy skills, but it certainly gives them many opportunities to apply them.

Well, here is what Marissa said while she was drawing that car. She said, "I do window drawings good. That's the key hole. That's the handle. I'm trying to concentrate. I haven't got to the tires yet. There are two tires inside of another," so we know she probably knows about inner tubes. "My grandma told me I was a good drawer and it's true." So now we know something about her dispositions toward herself as a drawer or as an artist. Then she's saying, "ATA: You're on Vacation. That's the plane we rode on," and then she drew the letters on the tire. "Florida was so wonderful. I didn't have to wear pants! This is a carrot van. I think I'm done with the front. Let's move to the front."

So from that, we know that maybe we need to revisit the concept of front and back with her. So we learn a lot about children by watching what they make, seeing what they do, and listening to what they say. Similarly, from the project on houses, you can see that this child is reflecting on past experience, and she says, "My house is an apartment house. We have an upstairs and a downstairs." And she even showed the parking spaces. Whoops, excuse me. It's not just drawing, though.

Revisiting past experience also takes place through dramatic play. And here you can see – in dramatic play and also in the housekeeping area, and also in the block area. So here you can see that the teacher wanted to get some play going where she could find out what the children already know, so she put a few props into the housekeeping area, some shopping carts.

And we need to remember – and I think the Project Approach supports the importance of play, the important role that play has in cognitive development, because as children are playing, they're engaging in convergent and divergent thinking, they're problem-solving, their language and their vocabulary is developing, and they're increasing their social and their emotional development as they make choices and converse with one another. And in my experience – and I've worked with many teachers who have implemented the Project Approach – teachers consistently state their belief that challenging behaviors are reduced during project work.

Messing around with the topic. So I kind of thought at the beginning of this project, the car project, that the children would want to build a car – excuse me – would want to build an automotive lab and – because I was going to take them to visit the automotive lab and they had not been there before. So we started to take small groups in to visit. And here you see a small group of four children that I took down on a little walk, and one of the students is showing them a motor that's been taken out of a car.

I think that the point I wanted to make by showing you this picture is not only is it important for them to have opportunities to mess around with the topic, but it may be to your benefit to pick a topic that is close by, something that maybe isn't as fancy and as exotic as something you might have to take a bus to visit, but something that you can visit and revisit with children. We did a project once on eggs, and the children were so interested in the egg and the membrane and what was inside the egg. We sometimes forget how interested children can be in everyday things and how they work.

A tip from me: when you're trying to get projects started, it can be really helpful to share tools with them that are associated with the topic. So we had a daily journaling activity, or a table where children would come to journal, and every day we would put a different tool out for them to draw. And there's just something about tools that seems to be really appealing to children. So here you see a pair of pliers that one of the children drew during the car project.

Young children are interested in real things, I guess. Sometimes we give them plastic versions of things in primary colors. And I think if the real object is safe for them to play with, it's to their benefit and to our benefit to actually give them the real thing. So we put some automotive parts that the automotive instructors assured me were safe into the water table. And here you can see 4-year-old Chase was using a Phillips screwdriver tool to take this thing apart, which I thought was really amazing, you know, really, really high-level fine motor activity.

But one of the things Lilian Katz has taught us to say is never underestimate children. And 3-year-old Cassie was sitting on the floor next to him, and he actually was handing the parts to her. And as I

watched, I could see her putting them back together, and then she was actually using a Phillips screwdriver to screw them back together, something I would never have anticipated. But that's the benefit of project work. There's something for everyone to do at all developmental levels. And there are challenges where children can challenge themselves at the leading edge of their development. Everything in project work doesn't have to be child-initiated.

So because the children were doing this project on cars, I decided it would be kind of cool to plan an experiment with magnets where they would go into the automotive lab and they would see what parts of cars the magnets were attracted to. And it's sort of like a thematic unit in that you can add your own teacher-initiated activities onto the project. And here you can see that when we got back from the automotive lab, one of the little girls wanted to record the answers. And over here on this clipboard is where I'd actually recorded the data for the children. So they're going through this process of collecting data and recording it with my assistance, and then they actually recorded the results or the findings on this large chart that went up in our classroom.

Observational drawing is a key component of project work. So when children are participating in project work, they engage in drawing from observation. So instead of drawing a car from memory, they would draw that car right there. And this kind of drawing where they're actually trying to collect data in their drawing or to record details with some accuracy causes them to notice more detail. And the more detail they notice, the more knowledge they have to bring to a discussion and the more questions they might have about the topic.

So there was a little girl in my class – one of these two little girls – who attended one or two mornings a week for socialization. And she mainly – you know, she just mainly played, and I had not really been tracking her academics very well because she was attending for socialization. But her mom came to me and asked me if I thought she would be ready for kindergarten. And so, I thought as she was drawing that I would check on this; and here is her first drawing. And she was 4-and-a-half, so I was a little bit concerned.

So we went over and we felt the wheel, and we talked about it, we put our fingers in the cut-outs, and she went back over to her carpet and sat down, and this is what she drew. So I was amazed; and I think this shows the power of studying topics where children can actually investigate with their senses, can touch them, can get information about the topic by feeling and smelling and hearing – especially feeling. She did a third drawing, and this drawing actually had one-to-one correspondence in terms of the relationship to the number of lug nuts and cut-outs on the car.

So that brings us to the end of phase one. Phase two begins when children have questions. Now, if you get to the end of phase one and the kids say they aren't interested in the topic, "I don't want to know anything more about cars. There's nothing I want to find out," then you had a nice thematic unit and you can let it go. But typically, if you selected a good topic and the kids have had a little bit of chance to reflect on their past experience, they will have some questions. And what we can do as teachers is to look for some of these questions – one or two – that we think have some potential for investigation and ask the children to make predictions.

So here's one where I've made – put Marissa's interest in the grills of cars, and I've put her question up here: "What are the holes for in the front of the car?" And then you can ask the kids to make predictions, and different children may have different predictions. And then as you're gathering data and you're finding out and you're interviewing guest experts and children are looking in child reference

books about the topic, they may find the answer, and then it's very exciting for them to record their findings.

Another thing to consider in terms of the topic, if there's only one or two children who have questions about the topic, you may not have enough class-wide interest for a project. But if there – there are several children – I think I counted last night, and there were nine different children who had questions here about cows – this was in a project on cows. That represents or sends a message to the teacher that, yes, there is enough interest or overall interest in cows among the children in this class for me to go ahead and pursue that project.

So phase two then would be preparing for field work, doing the field work. When I say field work, I mean like field trips; although, these may be trips to your playground to look at insects or these may be trips to your furnace room, or these may be, for us, in our case, a trip down the hall to the automotive lab.

Collecting data through drawing, through tallying, through interviewing. And representing what has been learned through drawing and tallying. And one question often leads to another, so you may get additional questions. One thing that I think it's important for us to do, and this is something in our research we've found that teachers sometimes struggle with, they have a hard time letting go of their plans.

So, again, I had thought this was going to be a project on the automotive lab, but what happened was that Taylor built this. Can you guess what this is? Well, Taylor called this his motor. And this was very exciting to us, because he'd never made anything that any of us could remember. And I think maybe he picked up on our excitement, but he was just very, very proud of his motor. And he carried it around the classroom, he played with it with the other children, and he really wanted to take it home. And I was hoping we could get the project going if he kept it at school, so his mom made the agreement to take it home and then bring it back the next day.

And he did bring it back the next day. And I listened to him as he was talking with another one of the children, and the child, Matty, said, "What are you going to do with this?" And Taylor said, "Oh, I think we should build a car." So when we went back to circle time then, instead of me saying, "Hey, let's build a car," I said, "Matty, why don't – Matty and Taylor, why don't you share the idea that you were talking about out in the art area. And remember when you were talking about what you were going to do with Taylor's motor?" And they said, "Well, I think we should make a car."

So immediately, then, the children wanted to make a car. They were very enthusiastic about that. And of course they were 4 years old, so I later discovered they actually thought we were going to be able to get in and drive it if they made a car. But we started our list of what we needed to make for the car. And this became a living document for us. As we went through and we began to construct, every day we constructed different things for the car. We would – when we would gather again together, we would check off the things that had been constructed.

So you can see that over time, and you can also see how I made like a little key using different colors. This was a very detailed car. It had keys and it had a shifter and it had a CD player and mud flaps, et cetera. And there were many challenges. I think sometimes we rob children of opportunities for growth by solving problems for them. Here you can see Taylor just with his hands to his head. He was – didn't know what to do because the front of the car wouldn't stay up.

Another event in the life of the project: one day I saw Taylor walking out of the classroom, and he had his hood pulled over his head, and he went over to the car that was coming together and he had a little piece of aluminum foil that he'd taped onto the side of it. And I could not figure out what he was – what he was doing. So I asked him, and he said he was welding the handle onto the car. Ha! And here he is. I think he had seen a welder when he was in the automotive lab. He was able then to share what he was doing with one of the automotive instructors who was good enough to come in and talk with the children about the construction of their car.

And he had this sustained interest in welding, so we actually went ahead and got a real welding mask to put into dramatic play, because he continued to make welding guns out of a number of things. You can't really do a project on conflict resolution. It's not concrete enough. I mean, it's not an object that the kids can feel and touch and measure and draw and pretend.

But there are many opportunities for conflict resolution within project work. So Marissa wanted to make the seats for the car. She got there very early in the morning and there weren't any other children there, so we worked with her. And she put stuffing inside of them and she made seat belts with clothespins and so forth. And she made four seats like this, and then she went to play. And after she went to play, the other children began to arrive, and they got into the car and they started to pull the stuffing out and throw it around.

Well, Lisa and her mom came, and they came and told me what had happened. And instead of going and telling the boys to put the stuffing back into the seats, I went and got Marissa. And you can tell from her body language how annoyed she was that her car had been vandalized. And the teacher just got down between the children and sort of mediated this conflict. And it was really a beautiful thing, because you can see from the look on Chase's face that he was truly sorry and regretful, and he apologized. And that was the last time the car was vandalized throughout a two-, three-month project.

Another challenge we had was with getting the steering wheel on. And lo and behold, it was actually Taylor who got the steering wheel to stay. And he used reference – reference literature, and that's something that's really important in project work is for us to have reference material for the children to use in their investigation. So he's looking to see where the drive shaft goes in the car, and we helped him to insert it.

Field work can be outside of the school. These children did a project on houses, and they just took a 10-minute walk and they did sketches of different houses that they saw in the neighborhood near their school. Here's one of their sketches. And ultimately they built – they built several houses. And this was what they called – this was their ultimate house. They called it their pet hotel. And here they are, they're actually putting the shingles on.

In the project on mail, they had the mail carrier come and they interviewed him. They looked – the teacher pointed out important attributes of the mail truck and talked about them with – I'm saying Taylor because his haircut looks the same – with the children in the class. And this is the mail truck that these children built. And it took them a long time, but they were so excited about it.

And in the end, our car came together. You can see it had a tinted windshield. It had many – it was quite elaborate. And toward the very end of this project, Taylor came running up and he said, "Teacher, teacher, do you want to know what I did? Do you want to know what I made? I made those things that if

you hook them onto the tractor and you hook them onto the car and you turn the key, it will make it go." And we said, "Oh my gosh, Taylor, you made jumper cables," and there he is with his jumper cable.

So phase three is really summarizing learning, sharing the learning with others, having a culminating event. Sometimes you have new questions that are going to lead to a project about a related topic. And just a couple of examples. Here is the cow that was the ultimate product of the project on cows. And as part of the culminating event for this project, they had a calf come to the playground, they ate ice cream, they had displays there of the children's work, and the children were able to interact with the real calf.

In our case, we took the cow – or – the cow – we took the car over to the main campus and set it up where students would pass as they were going between classes, and we put museum chain around it so that it looked very special. And the children would go and just ask people if they wanted to come and find out about their car. We set up documentation nearby, and we saw that the children were as excited about reading the documentation of their learning as they were about sharing the car with others.

Quickly, as a result of our research, what Dr. Ostrosky and I found is that when children were involved in a project – and these were students with IEPs. You can see the orange C stands for cooperative play, which would be the highest level of play. At the beginning of the project, before the project even started, the most prevalent type of play was parallel. And parallel play went down during the course of the project, and cooperative play steadily went up and was on a trajectory to continue. Likewise, children who were at risk, they were engaged in cooperative play more than the other types of play before the project started. But for them, cooperative play increased.

Here are some resources. If you have never been to Illinois Projects in Practice, I invite you to go there. The projects I've shared with you today – the house project, the project on cows – they're all there. And when you guys do projects, I hope you'll submit them, because we would love to put them up on our project. If you would like to know more about the car project, because there's lots more that I didn't share with you today, it is in video form and book form on a DVD that is in "Projects to Go." And there's a link here if you were wanting to get a hold of that.

So thanks for spending this 30 minutes with me today, and I'm going to turn it back over to Micki.

Dr. Ostrosky: Right. Thank you, Sallee; that was excellent. And I loved it. I'm sure the rest of our participants did also, all of the examples you provided, because the pictures and the stories you told certainly brought project work to life. I'm going to close there.

I want to thank Sallee. I love the quote you gave from Lilian – that's Lilian Katz – that said never underestimate the abilities of a child, which certainly it appears that through project work the strengths of all children can come out.