
Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies

Volume : 02 Issue : 10 October-2026

From Project-Like Activities to Project-Based Learning: Identifying PBL Characteristics in Event Management Courses at Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture

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Published Date: October 31, 2026

Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E10/2026-17

ABSTRACT: In event management training, learners are often required to address a series of interrelated tasks, ranging from idea generation and planning to resource coordination and the implementation of actual activities. However, the existence of a product, teamwork, or direct involvement in organizing an event is not sufficient to determine whether the learning process has been structured according to Project-Based Learning (PBL). This article examines the extent to which PBL characteristics are present in the Event Management courses at Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture. The research data comprise a survey of 137 students who had completed the courses but had not yet graduated and 230 alumni, of whom 184 met the eligibility criteria for analyses following the screening question on professional experience. The survey results were triangulated with interviews involving 10 lecturers, 10 administrators/experts, and 14 employers or representatives of organizations hosting interns, as well as syllabus, products, and learning records. The findings indicate that task authenticity, implementation through multiple stages, and the presence of tangible products are relatively evident. In contrast, the central role of the project, learner autonomy, feedback and revision, reflection, and evidence of individual learning outcomes are not consistently demonstrated. Accordingly, the article argues that the transition from project-like activities to PBL requires restructuring the learning and assessment processes, rather than merely expanding the scale of events or increasing their degree of completion.

KEYWORDS: Project-Based Learning, event management, higher education, project-like activities, learning outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The specific nature of event management training requires learners not only to master professional procedures but also to translate knowledge into actionable plans. During their studies, students may be required to develop ideas, formulate plans, draft scripts, organize communications, mobilize and coordinate resources, and handle unexpected situations during implementation. It is precisely this combination of knowledge and professional practice that provides the Event Management course with favorable conditions for organizing complex learning tasks associated with tangible products and real-world contexts (Huynh Cong Duan, 2026; Huynh Cong Duan, Trinh Dang Khoa, and Pham Phuong Thuy, 2026).

From a pedagogical perspective, these characteristics share several commonalities with Project-Based Learning (PBL), but the two concepts cannot be equated solely on the basis of the form of activity. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) emphasize the process through which learners construct understanding by engaging in meaningful tasks. Thomas (2000) highlights the centrality of the project, a driving question or problem, inquiry activities, learner autonomy, and authenticity. Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) further clarify the relationship between inquiry, collaboration, and product creation. Thus, the decisive factor is not simply whether learners “undertake a project,” but rather how the project organizes the learning process.

This distinction is particularly important for practice-oriented courses. A class may produce an actual event, attract a public audience, or mobilize substantial resources, yet these outcomes primarily reflect the achievements of the implementation activities. To determine the nature of PBL, it is also necessary to examine whether the project creates a need for learning, the extent to which learners participate in professional decision-making, whether the process involves cycles of feedback and revision, and whether implementation experience is transformed into understanding through reflection.

In the field of event management training, Canberg (2009) and Byrd (2009) show that involving students in the planning and organization of actual events can create a rich experiential learning environment. However, practical experience does not, in itself, guarantee that the core requirements of PBL have been met. Helle, Tynjälä, and Olkinuora (2006) also highlight the diversity of approaches to organizing project-based activities in post-secondary education. Guo, Saab, Post, and Admiraal (2020) show that research on PBL in higher education employs various types

of evidence, with self-reported data being relatively common. This suggests that identifying PBL requires triangulating learners' experiences, task design, and evidence of the learning process.

At Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture, event management content is incorporated into multiple training programs, which differ in their objectives, learning outcomes, duration, and professional orientations. The survey shows that 63.5% of students who had not yet graduated and 60.9% of alumni reported having directly developed and implemented actual events; a further 21.2% of students and 19.1% of alumni had participated in events and undertaken assigned tasks. Combining these two categories, the proportion of learners with direct event experience reached 84.7% among students and 80.0% among alumni. These figures indicate a clear foundation for practical learning, but they do not answer the question of whether these activities have been organized according to the logic of PBL.

To analyze this issue, the study employs eight groups of characteristics: the role of the project within the course; the guiding task or problem; the inquiry and implementation process; authenticity and real-world relevance; learner initiative and choice; tangible products or outcomes; feedback, assessment, and revision; and reflection and sharing of results. These eight characteristics are used as a framework for comparing course design, learner experiences, and implementation evidence, rather than as a scoring scale for labeling a course as either "PBL" or "non-PBL."

Accordingly, the research question is no longer whether students are assigned projects or directly organize events, but how PBL characteristics manifest themselves in existing learning processes. The article focuses on clarifying three issues: (1) the extent to which current activities exhibit PBL characteristics; (2) which characteristics are supported by relatively clear evidence and which remain inconsistent across contexts; and (3) which components of the learning process need to be strengthened to bring project-like activities closer to PBL.

Through this analysis, the article seeks to clarify the distinction between an activity that takes the form of a project and a learning process organized through a project, drawing on the specific case of the Event Management course.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Distinguishing Project-Like Activities from Project-Based Learning

In this study, PBL is understood primarily as an approach to organizing learning through projects, rather than as a label for any task that produces a tangible product or is carried out in groups. The key lies in the project creating a process through which learners identify problems, seek and process information, select approaches, coordinate actions, create products, receive feedback, and reflect on their prior experiences. Therefore, the educational value of a project is recognized not only through its final product but also through what learners must think about, decide, and adjust throughout the implementation process.

Foundational studies on PBL approach this issue from different perspectives but share a common principle: a project has pedagogical significance only when it directly contributes to the development of learners' knowledge and skills. Thomas (2000) emphasizes the centrality of the project, a driving question or problem, inquiry activities, learner autonomy, and authenticity. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) and Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2006) focus on the relationship between inquiry, collaboration, and product creation. The framework proposed by Larmer, Mergendoller, and Boss (2015) further incorporates requirements concerning student voice, reflection, critique and revision, and the presentation of results. In the Vietnamese context, Trinh Van Bieu, Phan Dong Chau Thuy, and Trinh Le Hong Phuong (2011) likewise regard project tasks as complex tasks that connect theory with practice and require learners to participate actively in the implementation process.

Based on this approach, the term "project-like activities" is used in this article to refer to activities that exhibit certain project characteristics, such as integrated tasks, teamwork, multiple stages, or tangible products. These characteristics provide a favorable foundation but are insufficient to establish that an activity has been organized according to PBL. To move closer to PBL, it is necessary to clarify whether the project genuinely drives learning, the extent to which learners are granted decision-making authority, how the inquiry process unfolds, whether feedback leads to revision, and what evidence is used to identify individual learning outcomes.

This distinction aligns with the objective of the article: rather than labeling existing courses as "PBL" or "non-PBL," the study identifies the extent to which PBL characteristics are present in current teaching and learning practices.

2.2. The eight-characteristic PBL framework used in the study

Based on a comparison of the approaches discussed above, this study develops an eight-characteristic framework for analyzing Event Management courses. This is an integrative framework designed to identify PBL characteristics, rather than a standardized measurement scale or an original set of criteria developed by any single author.

Table 1. The eight-characteristic PBL framework used in the study.

Characteristic	Aspects examined in the study	Primary sources of evidence
1. The role of the project within the course	Examines whether the project is aligned with the course objectives, content, and learning outcomes and plays a substantive role in the learning process, or whether it appears merely as an additional assignment.	Syllabus, tasks, learning process, and lecturer interviews
2. Guiding task or problem	Examines whether the task presents a sufficiently complex challenge requiring learners to analyze the situation, draw on their knowledge, and select an appropriate approach.	Task requirements, project proposals, plans, and explanations of proposed approaches
3. Inquiry and implementation process	Identifies whether learners seek information, develop plans, select approaches, implement activities, handle situations, and make adjustments throughout the process.	Inquiry materials, intermediate products, progress reports, and interviews

4. Authenticity and real-world relevance	Examines the extent to which the task exposes learners to requirements, resources, and constraints similar to those encountered in professional event management.	Event organization records, audiences, partners, resources, and event reports
5. Learner initiative and choice	Examines the extent to which students are allowed to propose ideas, select approaches, organize tasks, and take responsibility for their decisions.	Task assignments, student proposals, interviews, and process documentation
6. Tangible products or outcomes	Examines whether the products can be observed, presented, and assessed, while also comparing the group product with the process and each individual's contribution.	Plans, scripts, designs, communication materials, implementation records, and actual events
7. Feedback, assessment, and revision	Identifies points at which learners receive feedback, review their approaches, and modify their plans or products before completing the task.	Progress reports, feedback, product versions, and assessment forms/rubrics
8. Reflection and sharing of results	Examines whether learners analyze the process retrospectively, explain the results, draw lessons from their experience, and share the products or insights they have developed.	Final reports, post-event discussions, published materials, and interviews

Source: Survey results of the research team, 2026.

The eight characteristics are examined in relation to one another. An activity may demonstrate clear authenticity and tangible products without necessarily demonstrating a corresponding degree of learner choice, feedback, or reflection. Therefore, the study does not apply a common scoring threshold to classify courses; instead, each characteristic is examined against relevant evidence.

In this analytical approach, “manifestation” refers to evidence that a characteristic is present in the design or practice of teaching and learning, whereas “fulfillment” concerns the quality and extent to which that characteristic is implemented. For example, the existence of an actual event indicates that the task has a real-world component, but it is insufficient to establish the depth of inquiry or the degree of student autonomy. Similarly, the presence of a post-event report does not, in itself, demonstrate reflection if learners merely describe the results without analyzing the underlying causes, decisions, and lessons learned.

2.3. The relationship between PBL, learning outcomes, and experiential learning

The PBL framework in this article is considered in relation to learning outcomes and the way learners transform experience into understanding. From the perspective of curriculum design, Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and Constructive Alignment provide principles for examining the alignment between what learners are expected to achieve, the tasks they are required to perform, and the evidence used for assessment. According to Biggs (1996) and Biggs and Tang (2011), a learning activity is meaningful in relation to learning outcomes only when the task and assessment require learners to demonstrate the specific types of knowledge or competencies required by the program.

For the Event Management course, this raises an important requirement: the outcome of an event cannot substitute for the learning outcomes of individual students. A group product may demonstrate that the group has completed the task, but determining the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved requires further examination of the tasks undertaken by each individual, the decisions made, how knowledge was applied, and the evidence on which the assessment was based.

Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning provides an additional basis for explaining why participation in an actual event does not automatically produce learning outcomes. Experience becomes a source of learning only when learners have opportunities to review what happened, explain the causes, develop new understanding, and apply that understanding to subsequent decisions. Therefore, in PBL, feedback, revision, and reflection are not supplementary activities at the end of a project but links in the process that transform “having done” into “having learned.”

Accordingly, the article adopts the following overarching logic for its analysis:

Real-world task → inquiry and selection of an approach → implementation → feedback → revision → reflection → development of evidence of learning outcomes.

According to this logic, an event may achieve good organizational results, yet these alone are insufficient to determine the quality of the learning process. Conversely, the value of PBL is identified through the way the project creates opportunities for learners to learn, make adjustments, and demonstrate what they have achieved.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study combines quantitative and qualitative data and cross-references multiple sources to identify PBL characteristics in the teaching and learning practices of the Event Management course. The main period of analysis covers 2020–2025; the surveys and interviews were conducted in 2026, with additional data from learners who completed the course in the 2025–2026 academic year.

The questionnaire survey was conducted with 137 students who had completed the course but had not yet graduated and 230 alumni. The sample was selected using a non-probability sampling method, based on access to individuals who met the research eligibility criteria. For the items following screening question TT4, the analysis included 184 alumni who had jobs or professional activities related to event management. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with three individuals to check clarity and completion time; the pilot data were not included in the official sample. The official survey lasted 25 days in 2026. The sample included 95 students and 39 alumni who had completed the course in the 2025–2026 academic year; among the 184 alumni eligible for analysis, 30 belonged to this academic year. These cases were used as supplementary data.

The PBL indicators were measured on a five-point scale, from 1 to 5. The results were described in terms of the number and percentage of respondents selecting level 4 or 5 out of the total valid responses for each indicator. Code 0 (“Do not remember/Not applicable”) was excluded from the denominator for the corresponding indicator. PBL10 was included in the alumni questionnaire but had no data in the response file

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analyzed; therefore, the study neither imputed nor substituted the missing data. The percentages reflect only the extent to which learners reported observing PBL characteristics in their own experiences and should not be interpreted as the percentage of courses meeting PBL requirements.

The qualitative data comprised in-depth interviews with 10 lecturers, 10 administrators/experts, and 14 employers or representatives of organizations hosting interns. The interviews focused on task design, the degree of student initiative, guidance, feedback and assessment, organizational conditions, and professional competency requirements. The data were coded by respondent group and analyzed thematically.

The study also analyzed training programs, course syllabi, assignments, plans, scripts, communication products, assessment records, and final reports. Five representative cases were used for illustration and were not intended to represent all classes. The sources were cross-referenced to identify similarities, differences, and aspects for which evidence was insufficient. The interpretation of the findings does not aim to establish causal relationships but focuses on clarifying the extent to which PBL characteristics are manifested and the gap between project-like activities and PBL requirements.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Practical foundation and project-like activities

The survey data show that practical activities are relatively prominent in the Event Management courses. Among the 137 students who had completed the course but had not yet graduated, 63.5% reported that their group/class had directly developed and implemented an actual event, while 21.2% had participated in an event and undertaken certain assigned tasks. Among the 230 alumni, the corresponding proportions were 60.9% and 19.1%. Combining these two levels of participation, 84.7% of students and 80.0% of alumni reported having had direct experience with actual events as part of the course.

Analysis of course syllabi and lecturer interviews also shows that learning tasks are commonly carried out through multiple stages, including idea generation, planning, scriptwriting, design, communication, resource mobilization, implementation, and review. The extent of implementation varies across classes: in some cases, students organize an event relatively comprehensively, whereas in others, activities are limited mainly to project proposals, selected practical stages, or small-scale events. Therefore, the level of direct participation indicates a favorable foundation for applying PBL, but does not in itself provide sufficient grounds for determining whether the teaching and learning process has been organized according to PBL.

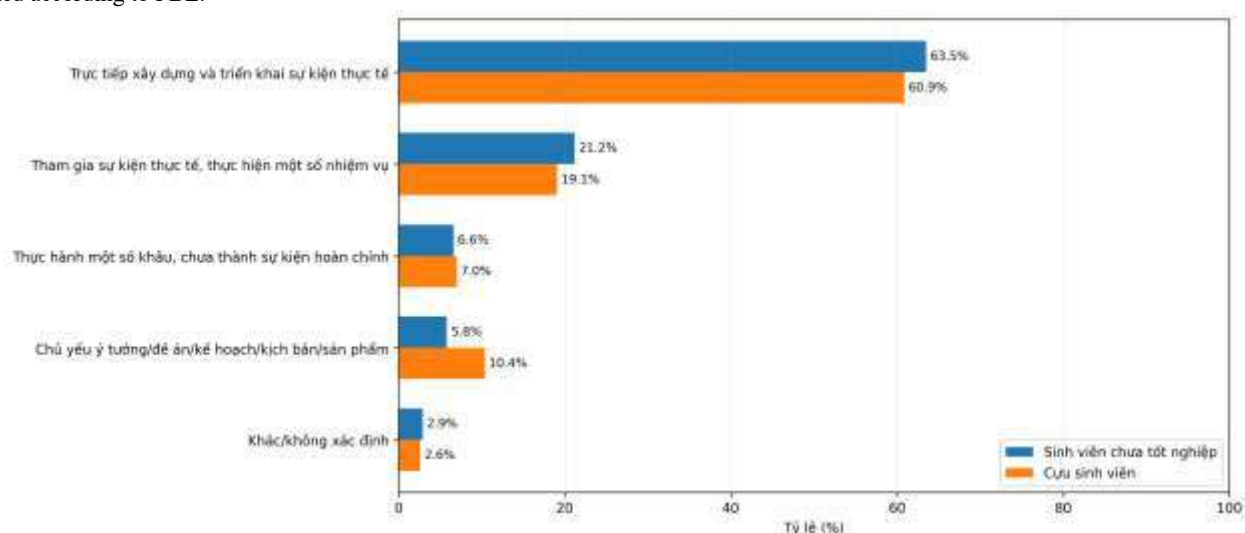


Figure 1. Predominant levels of practical activity in the Event Management course

Source: Survey results of the research team, 2026.

4.2. The extent to which learners report PBL characteristics

For the PBL indicators, the proportions of respondents selecting levels 4 or 5 were generally high. Among students, these proportions ranged from 80.2% to 86.6%; among alumni eligible for analysis, the 11 indicators with comparable data ranged from 88.4% to 95.1%.

Among students, PBL4 had the highest proportion (86.6%), followed by PBL2 (85.8%) and PBL6 (85.0%), while PBL5 had the lowest proportion (80.2%). Among alumni, PBL1 had the highest proportion at 95.1%, followed by PBL4 and PBL11, both at 93.3%, while PBL7 had the lowest proportion at 88.4%. PBL10 recorded 84.0% among students but had no corresponding data in the alumni response file and was therefore excluded from the comparison.

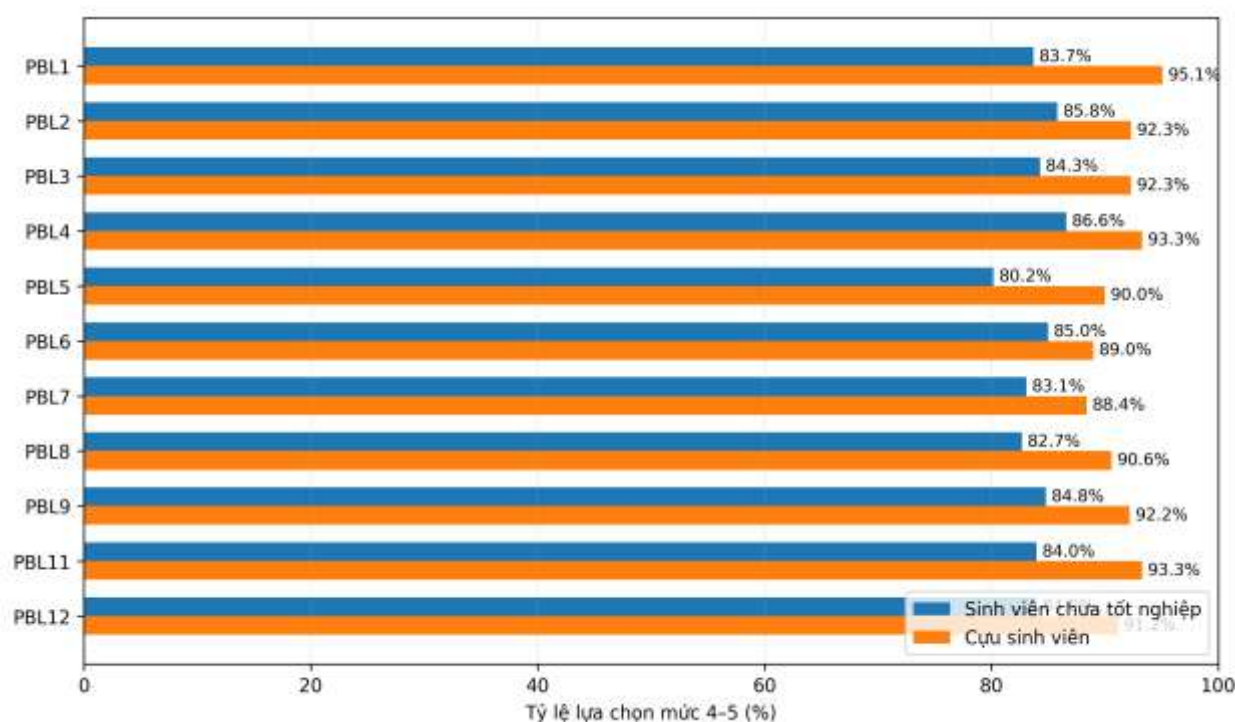


Figure 2. Proportions of responses at levels 4–5 for PBL indicators with comparable data between students and alumni

Source: Survey results of the research team, 2026.

Note: The proportions were calculated based on the valid responses for each indicator. Code 0, “Do not remember/Not applicable,” was excluded for the corresponding indicator. PBL10 was excluded from the comparison because no data were available in the alumni response file.

These proportions reflect the extent to which learners reported observing PBL-related characteristics in their own experiences; they are not used to infer the proportion of classes or courses meeting PBL requirements. Therefore, the survey findings should be interpreted alongside data from course syllabi, interviews, and evidence of the learning process.

4.3. PBL characteristics that are relatively clearly evident

Cross-analysis of the data sources indicates that authenticity and tangible products/outcomes are the two characteristics supported by relatively clear evidence. Students undertake numerous tasks closely resembling professional practice, such as planning, scriptwriting, personnel assignment, communication, fundraising, coordination with partners, and serving the public. Learning products are also diverse, including documentation, designs, communication products, resource plans, final reports and, in many cases, actual events.

The inquiry and implementation process across multiple stages is also evident. Lecturer interviews indicate that many tasks progress from idea proposals and plan development to the presentation of proposed approaches, receipt of feedback, refinement, and implementation. In some cases, products are revised through multiple rounds of feedback before completion.

In addition, learner initiative and choice are evident in many classes through students’ proposal of ideas, selection of approaches, assignment of tasks, and assumption of responsibility for their assigned work. However, the degree of initiative still depends on group capacity, task characteristics, and requirements concerning procedures, safety, and budget; some groups continue to require fairly specific guidance. Therefore, this characteristic is present but is not demonstrated consistently across classes.

Overall, the Event Management courses already have favorable conditions for developing PBL, particularly in terms of task authenticity, the presence of tangible products, and implementation processes involving multiple stages.

4.4. Characteristics that are not yet consistently evident

First, the central role of the project in the learning process is not clearly demonstrated in all cases. Using an event or product for final assessment does not, in itself, indicate that the project has become the organizing framework for learning. Some course records do not fully demonstrate a sustained connection among the knowledge being learned, the problem to be addressed, and the stages of project development.

Second, the depth of inquiry and problem-solving activities is not supported by consistent evidence. Students have searched for information, developed plans, and handled various tasks, but the number of stages involved does not fully indicate how learners use information to analyze, explain, and adjust their approaches.

Third, feedback, revision, and reflection have been documented, but their implementation is not standardized. Some lecturers use progress reports, idea approval, script feedback, and post-event reviews. However, evidence of feedback, the reasons for revisions, and each student’s reflection process remains incomplete.

Fourth, evidence of individual learning outcomes is more limited than evidence of the group’s collective product. A successful event may reflect the group’s collaborative performance, but it is insufficient to determine the extent to which each student has applied knowledge, made decisions, and achieved the required learning outcomes. Therefore, group products need to be considered alongside process evidence, individual contributions, students’ ability to explain their decisions, and reflection activities.

Taken together, all eight PBL characteristics are evident to some extent in the contexts surveyed, but they are not consistently demonstrated. The most notable gaps concern the role of the project in the learning process, learner autonomy, feedback and revision, reflection, and the ability to identify individual learning outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

The research findings show that project-like activities are already clearly present in the Event Management courses, but their presence is not sufficient to equate them with PBL. The distinction lies in how the project is used to organize learning: whether learners are genuinely required to investigate, make choices, implement, receive feedback, revise, and reflect throughout the process. This understanding is consistent with the perspectives of Thomas (2000), Blumenfeld et al. (1991), and Larmer, Mergendoller, and Boss (2015), according to which the nature of PBL is identified through the structure of the learning process rather than solely through the final product.

In the Event Management course, task authenticity and tangible products are notable strengths. Students are placed in situations involving the public, resources, partners, and constraints that closely resemble those encountered in professional practice. However, these strengths provide only a foundation for PBL; the extent to which PBL requirements are met also depends on learners' autonomy, how feedback is used to revise their work, and their ability to turn experience into learning through reflection. These elements are not yet implemented consistently across classes.

One point to note is that group outcomes cannot substitute for individual learning outcomes. A successfully organized event may demonstrate the group's ability to collaborate, but it is insufficient to confirm that each student has achieved the corresponding learning outcomes. Assessment therefore needs to consider the collective product, individual contributions, process evidence, the ability to explain choices, and reflection activities. This approach helps distinguish the success of an event from the extent to which its participants have learned.

Based on these findings, the transition from project-like activities to PBL in the Event Management course needs to focus on three aspects: aligning tasks with learning outcomes; incorporating milestones for inquiry, feedback, revision, and reflection throughout the process; and developing evidence that enables the learning outcomes of each student to be identified. When these elements are connected, the project can genuinely become the organizing framework for learning rather than merely a form of practical activity or a final product for assessment.

6. CONCLUSION

The Event Management courses at Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture have established a relatively clear practical foundation for applying PBL. Among the characteristics examined, task authenticity, a multistage implementation process, and tangible products are relatively clearly evident. By contrast, the central role of the project, learner autonomy, feedback and revision, reflection, and evidence of individual learning outcomes are not yet demonstrated consistently across classes and training contexts.

These findings indicate that students' direct participation in or organization of an event is not sufficient to establish that the teaching and learning process has been organized according to PBL. The key areas requiring change are how tasks are aligned with learning outcomes, how learners participate in the processes of inquiry, decision-making, and revision, and how each student's learning outcomes are identified through appropriate evidence.

This study provides a practical basis for further improving the organization and assessment of Event Management courses in the direction of PBL. However, because the survey sample was selected using a non-probability sampling method and the study did not employ an experimental design to determine the causal effects of PBL, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of the contexts surveyed and further validated through future applied research./.

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