

Blended Project-Based Learning Model in Developing Students' Soft Skills in Higher Education Setting

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Abstract: *This study explores the use of Blended Project-Based Learning (Blended PBL) in higher education to enhance students' soft skills and fulfil higher education curriculum requirements involves integrating technology with traditional project-based learning method. This qualitative research involves students from the Fifth semester Study Programs at the Faculty of Teacher Training. Education, Private University in Jombang. The object of research is to portray the improvement of students' soft skills through blended PBL in order to prepare future professional and personal success. The data collection used open-ended questionnaire and observation. The validity of the data uses method triangulation, source triangulation, and perseverance of observation. The data was analyzed by thematic analysis. The findings showed that blended PBL Model in education can enhance students' soft skills which include aspects of self-awareness, trust, adaptability, critical thinking, organizational awareness, attitude, initiative, empathy, integrity, self-control, leadership, problem-solving, risk-taking, and Time management. The Blended Project-Based Learning (Blended PBL) model in higher education combines technology and traditional methods, involving real-world projects, critical thinking, and collaboration. Based on these findings, it is suggested for the educators in higher education institutions can effectively implement a Blended PBL model that not only enhances academic learning but also develops essential soft skills, preparing students for future professional and personal success.*

Keywords: Blended Project-Based Learning; Soft Skills; A Higher Education Setting

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are interpersonal abilities which are crucial for graduates' employability in the 21st-century workplace, as studies demonstrate their importance in the workplace. Soft skills, which are non-technical, invisible, and immediate, can be transmitted and practiced over time with a lecturer. They focus on problem-solving, teamwork, and communication, and are essential for academic achievement in higher education (Mustikawati et al., 2016; Rameli et al., 2018; Ratka & Pharm D, 2018).

According to Suhaili et al. (2015), soft skills for college students encompass problem-solving, communication, negotiation, environmental awareness, self-management, critical thinking, and creative thinking. Project-based learning is a teaching model that uses projects to teach soft, hard, and character skills. Students produce products based on real experiences, focusing on researching, analyzing, creating, and presenting these skills. (Abidin et al., 2020; Oktavianto, 2017). The Indonesian Ministry of Science Technology and Higher Education launched the Guidance of Higher Education Curriculum in DIKTI (2016), requires universities

to focus on soft skills over hard ones. The Ministry of Education in Dikti (2020) launched Independent Learning and Independent Campus to enhance students' soft and hard skills beyond academics, aiming to enhance individual competitiveness in the job market and career development.

Project-based learning is one of the learning strategies that produces a product as an output, such as making a short video for the topic of material in the course. This technique is appropriate for teaching English from kindergarten to university levels (Burlbaw, 2023; Jacques, 2017). Problem-solving abilities, collaborative skills, communication skills, personal skills, and resource management skills are all part of project-based learning, which aims to prepare students for a knowledge-based workplace (Aldabbus, 2018; Hung et al., 2022).

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is a strategy that enhances academic achievement, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, independence, and overall learning motivation (Azizah & Widjajanti, 2019; Manshur, 2020; Zubaidah et al., 2017). It promotes student-centered learning (SCL), a challenge in university learning (Linda et al., 2019; Prajanto, 2020). PjBL involves group assignments on complex problems, encouraging active learning through questioning, investigation, explanation, and interaction. Students are encouraged to generate and present products from their investigations, fostering a deeper understanding of learning and fostering positive attitudes towards studies. This model also aligns with industry needs and is expected to be linear with the production process of a company (Abidin et al., 2020; Oktavianto, 2017).

To enhance soft skill aspects, a combination of structured and innovative learning methods, active teaching, and 21st-century skills is essential. Blended Project Based Learning (BPBL) is an innovative teaching model that combines technology and student-centered learning, providing a flexible environment for communication, interactive, and creative knowledge development (Abuhmaid 2020; ; Mirah et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2018).. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture emphasizes the integration of ICT and communication skills in the 21st-century curriculum. Teachers face challenges in developing teaching strategies that incorporate technology, as it can improve soft skill aspects involve communication skill, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, and leadership skill, emotional intelligence and time management. (Holloway & Gouthro, 2020).

Blended Project Based Learning (B-PBL) is a technology-based learning model that combines project-based approaches with blended learning. Blended PjBL model is a new learning concept that combines virtual and online projects with face-to-face teaching theories. Blended learning combines e-learning, face-to-face, and practice, combining media, models, theories, and online methods (Matarirano et al., 2021; Omodan & Diko, 2021; Tsakeni, 2021). It helps students develop real-life problem-solving skills and promotes time efficiency. This innovative approach encourages innovation and allows for flexible communication between teachers and students, allowing them to meet their learning needs

without compromising space or time constraints (Bruggeman et al. 2019; López-Pellisa et al. 2020).

Some studies revealed that Blended PBL is a crucial approach for students to develop skills for future success and life challenges. It uses social constructivist methodologies like collaborative thinking, problem-based learning, and peer teaching clusters. Research on blended project-based learning focuses on improving informal learning, retention, and examination results. Business programs and technical and vocational departments often evaluate project-based learning in one subject or lesson compared to traditional learning. (Elisabet et al., 2019; Rubrica, 2018; Afriana et al., 2016; Almulla, 2018). However, there are still a few previous studies investigated the blended PBL which can enhance students' soft skill aspects. To fill this research gap, the researchers portrayed the implementation of blended PBL which can also stimulate students' soft skill aspects.

This study investigated blended project-based learning model in developing students' soft skills involving problem-solving, communication, negotiation, environmental awareness, self-management, critical thinking, and creative thinking. This approach enhances soft skill aspects involving critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and self-regulated learning, helping EFL students succeed in today's learning environment preparing students for future professional and personal success.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive case study as the research design. It aimed to portray people's ideas, attitudes, qualities, and behavior (Rukminingsih, 2020; Yin, 2017). The purpose of this current research was to portray the improvement of students' soft skills through blended PBL in order to prepare future professional and personal success.

The sample was taken by using purposive sampling technique with the tendency of researchers to choose the information considered to know the information and the problem in-depth and can be trusted to be a source of data. The subjects selected were the students who have the course by using blended PBL. The research subject consisted of 30 students from the education faculty consisted from six departments of education at PGRI Jombang University.

The data collection were taken from open-ended questionnaire and observation of the research subject selected. The validity of the data uses method triangulation, source triangulation, and perseverance of observation. The data was analyzed by thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

After conducting observation and distributing the open-ended questionnaire to portray the implementation of Blended PBL which can enhance students soft skill aspect. This

study was conducted in one of the private universities in Indonesia, namely PGRI Jombang University in Education department. Here is the findings from observation and open-ended questionnaire after implementing their course through blended project -based learning (Blended PBL).

Table 1. Summary of Students' response on Soft Skill Aspect

NO	Soft Skill Aspect	Questions	Summary of Students' Response
1	Communication Skills	How confident do you feel when expressing your ideas among your members of your group during doing the project ?	The students feel free to express their ideas during discussion with their peers and lecturer both in online and offline
		How often do you participate in group discussions during doing your project?	The students participate actively in group discussions during doing your project.
2	Teamwork and Collaboration	How well do you work in a team during doing your project ?	Most of the students work well during the process of doing their project.
		How often do you help your classmates with their work during doing the project ?	The students mostly help each other with their work during doing the project.
3	Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving	How do you raise your opinion critically to clarify your understanding during discussion with your group project?	During peer review sessions, students critically evaluate each other's work, providing constructive feedback and suggesting improvements based on logical reasoning and evidence.
		Do you find some difficult problems during doing project ? and how do you solve the problem you faced?	Yes, the students find some problems that should be solved with their team. students use critical thinking to weigh the pros and cons of different solutions and decide on the most feasible and effective approach.

4	Leadership Skills	How often do you take on a leadership role in group projects?	The students leadership role often appear in doing their project.
		How comfortable are you with making decisions for a group?	The students feel free and comfortable with making decision in group
5	Emotional Intelligence	How well do you manage stress during presentations?	The students can manage stress during presentation because they master the material they presents
		How often do you consider others' feelings before speaking?	The students can understand their friend's feeling and appreciate their friends
6	Time Management	How often do you complete your assignments on time?	The students complete their assignment based on the time line they plan
		How do you prioritize your tasks?	The students make a list for the activities based on time line.
7	Adaptability and Flexibility	How well do you adapt to changes in your schedule or plans?	The students can adapt to changes from the schedule and soon adapt to the re schedule activity.
		How do you handle unexpected challenges?	The students stay calm and find a solution.
8	Interpersonal Skills	How often do you engage in conversations with classmates outside of class?	The students engage mostly during making discussion with their peers.
		How do you resolve conflicts with classmates?	The students avoid the conflict and talk it out calmly.
9	Work Ethic	How often do you put in extra effort to improve your work?	The students work hard mostly to finish their project.

How do you stay motivated when working on a challenging task?	The students determine the goals to achieve the challenging of their project.
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Based on the finding taken from students' open-ended questionnaire regarding to soft skill aspect dimensions in table 1 involving student' viewed on communicative skills, Teamwork and Collaboration, Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving, in Leadership Skills, Emotional Intelligence, Time Management, Adaptability and Flexibility, Interpersonal Skills, Work Ethic.

The summary based on the table 1 depicted that in (1) communicative skill, students were encouraged to express their ideas in discussions with peers and lecturers, both online and offline, and actively participate in group discussions during project completion, (2) in Teamwork and Collaboration, students generally perform well in their project tasks, often collaborating with each other to complete their work efficiently, (3) in Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving, peer review sessions involve students evaluating each other's work, providing constructive feedback, and suggesting improvements. They use critical thinking to weigh solutions and decide the most feasible approach, (4) in Leadership Skills, students often exhibit leadership roles in their projects, feeling free and comfortable in making decisions within their group, (5) in Emotional Intelligence, students effectively manage stress during presentations by mastering the material, understanding their friends' feelings, and appreciating their friendships, (6) in Time Management, Students adhere to their planned time line for completing assignments and creating a list of activities, (7) in Adaptability and Flexibility,

Students are adept at adapting to schedule changes and quickly reschedule activities, maintaining calmness and finding solutions, (8) in Interpersonal Skills, Students primarily engage in discussions with their peers, avoiding conflict and discussing it calmly and (9) Work Ethic, Students diligently work to complete their projects, setting clear goals to overcome the challenges they face.

Table 2. Improved Aspects of Student Soft Skills

No	Soft Skill Aspects	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3
1	self-awareness	Enough	Good	Good
2	Trust	Enough	Enough	Good
3	Adaptability	Less	Enough	Good
4	Critical thinking	Enough	Good	Very good
5	Organizational awareness	Less	Enough	Good
6	Attitude	Enough	Goof	Very good
7	Initiative	Less	Good	Very good
8	Empathy	Enough	Good	Very good

9	Integrity	Enough	Good	Very good
10	Self-control	Enough	Good	Good
11	Leadership	Less	Enough	Good
12	The solution to of problem,	Enough	Good	Very good
13	Time management	Enough	Good	Good

Based on the finding from observation in table 2, it could be found that there was an improvement on the students' soft skill aspects during implementation of blended PBL model. The observation data found that the implementation of Blended PBL in Education Department students effectively improved student soft skills, as evidenced by this finding from the researchers' observation based on soft skill aspects involving self-awareness, trust, adaptability, critical thinking, organizational awareness, attitude, initiative, empathy, integrity, self-control, leadership, problem-solving, risk-taking, and Time management.

The finding showed that in the meeting 1, the soft skill aspects were mostly in enough levels and a few aspects were in less level. In the meeting 2, the soft skill aspect were in good levels and a few aspects were in enough level. In the meeting 3, the soft skill aspects were in very good level and a few aspects in were in good level. It could be concluded that the blended PBL can enhance students' soft skill aspects. The students were trained their soft skills while they were doing their project.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it could be inferred that blended PBL can enhance students soft skill aspects involving The findings showed that blended PBL Model in education can enhance students' soft skills which include aspects of self-awareness, trust, adaptability, critical thinking, organizational awareness, attitude, initiative, empathy, integrity, self-control, leadership, problem-solving, risk-taking, and Time management. The findings showed that blended PBL Model in education can enhance students' soft skills which include aspects of self-awareness, trust, adaptability, critical thinking, organizational awareness, attitude, initiative, empathy, integrity, self-control, leadership, problem-solving, risk-taking, and Time management.. It is in line with Suhaili et al. (2015) stated that project-based learning is a teaching model that focuses on developing soft skills in college students, such as problem-solving, communication, and environmental awareness, through real-life experiences.

Blended Project Based Learning (Blended-PBL) is a technology-based model that combines project-based approaches with blended learning, fostering real-life problem-solving skills, time efficiency, and flexible communication between teachers and students. It is in line with some previous studies that blended Project Based Learning (B-PBL) is a technology-based learning strategy that blends project-based methods with blended learning. It helps pupils acquire real-world problem-solving abilities and improves time management. This unique strategy stimulates innovation and provides for flexible communication between

teachers and students, allowing them to satisfy their learning needs while not violating space or time limits. (Bruggeman et al.2019; López-Pellisa et al. 2020).

Blended PBL is a teaching model that combines technology and student-centered learning to enhance soft skill development. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture emphasizes integrating ICT and communication skills in the 21st-century curriculum, but teachers face challenges in developing technology-based teaching strategies. To improve soft skill components, a combination of structured and innovative learning approaches, active teaching, and 21st-century abilities are required. Blended Project Based Learning (BPBL) is a novel teaching approach that blends technology and student-centered learning to create a flexible environment for communication, interactive learning, and creative knowledge acquisition. (Abuhmaid 2020; ; Mirah et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2018).

PBL in Education department focuses on basic concepts, problem definition, self-learning, exchange of knowledge, and conclusion. It improves students' soft skills, preparing them for future professional and personal success. Students practice problem-solving, leadership, time management, respecting opinions, and emotional regulation. However, it requires time and patience from lecturers in planning, implementing, and conducting evaluations. It is in line with (Aldabbus, 2018; Hung et al., 2022).argued that the blended PBL stimulated soft skill aspects that could be prepare in their workplace environmnet involving problem-solving abilities, collaborative skills, communication skills, personal skills, and resource management skills are all part of project-based learning, which aims to prepare students for a knowledge-based workplace

CONCLUSION

The investigation of data from the research problem suggests that blended PBL model implemented in Education department could enhance students' soft skills, preparing them for for a knowledge-based workplace . Implementation of enhancing student soft skills through implementing blended PBL in Education department students to prepare for future professional and personal success. The study found that blended PBL courses can enhance students' soft skills, such as self-awareness, trust, adaptability, critical thinking, organizational awareness, attitude, initiative, empathy, integrity, self-control, leadership, problem-solving, risk-taking, and time management, leading to personal future work preparation. The study suggests that the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education should implement blended PBL learning in all subjects to encourage students centre, technology based and enhance students' soft skill ability.

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