

20 tips for putting Google's 20 percent time in your classroom

By Stephen Noonoo, Editor,

2 innovative educators share tons of tips for creating innovative, inquiry-based classrooms in only one day a week



Originally pioneered at places like [3M and HP](#), Google's vaunted 20 percent time, which lets employees spend a full one-fifth of their time on passion projects, has spawned everything from Gmail to Google News. Now it's gaining ground among educators who are carving out a chunk of their already-limited time with students to work on innovative inquiry-based projects that resonate on a deeper, personal level.

AJ Juliani, an ed tech innovation specialist at Upper Perkiomen School District in Pensburg, PA, piloted 20 percent time three years ago when he taught High School English at his former school, and since then, he's authored [Inquiry and Innovation in the Classroom: Using 20% Time, Genius Hour, and PBL to Drive Student Success](#), and created a [free course for teachers](#) on his blog. Kevin Brookhouser, a high school English teacher at York School in Monterey, CA, has also run 20 percent time projects in his classroom and recently finished writing a book about his experiences, called [The #20time Project](#) after raising money through a Kickstarter campaign.

Recently, Juliani and Brookhouser shared their top tips for getting started, overcoming obstacles, and creating something students find truly meaningful.

1. Dedicate One Day A Week

When he began 20 percent projects in his classroom, Juliani decided to dedicate every Friday to the project, instead of 20 percent of each class day, which he found insufficient. "I wanted to give them the ability to get into that [state of flow](#)," he says. "Giving them 10 minutes a day, they were never going to get into that."

2. It's Not Just for High School

Twenty percent projects can be used in any subject, and with any grade or skill level. "I've done genius hour at the elementary level all the way to doing it with teachers so it doesn't really matter the level," Juliani says. "It's more or less how you're structuring or framing it to what that actual subject or grade level is."

3. Set Your Own Parameters

As English teachers, both Juliani and Brookhouser knew that students would be hitting standards just by virtue of all the speaking, listening, reading, and journal writing they'd be doing. For other subjects, they suggest setting parameters on a subject-by-subject basis. Math teachers, for example, might require students to do accounting or use equations to solve project problems.

4. Start With Interests

“Passions sometimes is a big word” for students, says Juliani, who began the project by asking students to name their interests instead. “Whether high school or middle school or elementary students, they don’t have passions, but they have interests.”

5. Inspire Students With Great Projects

Over the years, Brookhouser’s students have worked with local architects to develop an eco-friendly dream home, started YouTube communities around teen fiction books, began an Instagram account ([@CookThat](#)) encouraging girls to cook and have healthy relationships with food, created their own games using Java, and more.

6. Use 20 Time to Improve the Community

Brookhouser uses his 20 percent time to foster student engagement within their school and community. “I first want my students to focus on their audience rather than their own personal passions, and filling a need that’s out there,” he says. Once they tap into that need, “I think the passion comes as a product of that.”

7. Find Projects That Pay

For students that struggled even to find an interest, Juliani got creative juices flowing by challenging students to turn a profit. “I had a couple students that did projects where they were trying to make money and that’s what drove them. If you get students to choose a project they care about or are interested in the rest of it goes much more smoothly.”

8. Get Students Thinking Like Entrepreneurs

According to Brookhouser, “increasingly, no matter what position anyone takes, students who enter in the real world need to think of themselves as entrepreneurs, even if they end up working at an organization or a big corporation. We all need to solve problems in an innovative way, and that’s really the big goal.”

9. Group Projects Work Well

For the most part, Brookhouser encouraged students to partner up for their projects. “They can do so much more together working as a team,” he says. “And in the real world generally we work in teams.” Likewise, groups can be used in younger grades to get students with similar interests collaborating with each other.

10. ...Solo Ones Do, Too

Juliani, on the other hand, had students work individually. But instead of isolating students, it actually brought the class closer together, as they became interested in each other’s projects and their personal interests. “One of the side benefits was the kids learning more about each other through this project and also me learning more about my students,” he says.

11. Let Students Pitch the Class

Both Brookhouser and Juliani hold formal “pitch days” where students present their project idea via PowerPoint, with Juliani even fashioning his after the popular elevator pitch show Shark Tank. “They got four slides: what they were learning about, why they chose it, what they were going to do, and how they were going to measure success,” he says.

12. And Let Students Give Feedback

During the pitch-day event, Juliani encouraged students to share their feedback on each other’s projects. As a result, “so many students upped what they were doing,” he says. “It was like positive peer pressure.”

13. Think Practically About Projects

“As a teacher you’re going to have to become much more active to do two things: challenging the students to push themselves a little bit and then also reeling some students back in who are maybe going above and beyond,” says Juliani, who adds that students can always continue a project with new goals in the next semester if they want.

14. Be Flexible

At some point, students will likely have to tweak their projects. One year, a group of Brookhouser’s students aimed to break the Guinness World Record for the world’s longest continuous BBQ. But after consulting with Guinness the students discovered they were too young to compete. Instead, they took the work they had done and turned it into an event to feed the homeless. “In the end, they felt really great about the work that they did.”

15. Connect With Professionals

Brookhouser has gotten a lot of support for the project from local businesses and experts—like doctors and architects—via mentorships, where the professionals lend their expertise and their time to students. “I think a lot of people recognize the value of participating in the education of young people,” he says.

16. Create Something Tangible

At the end of each semester Juliani’s students must have something to show for their work. It could be a report or a presentation, or something more creative. He recalls one student who used her time to learn American Sign Language to communicate with a deaf niece. For her final project, “she got up at the end of the presentation and she performed a song in Sign Language.”

17. Keep Track of Student Progress

In addition to a final presentation, Brookhouser tells every student to blog about their projects as a means of keeping him in the loop. “They include an image and that’s how I keep them accountable for what they’re doing,” he says. “I use that as a tool to keep them motivated.”

18. Some Sacrifice Is Necessary

Even though Brookhouser ultimately had to give up some of the traditional literature he usually taught, he says the trade off is well worth it. “On some level it’s painful to give up anything, but what my students are producing instead in that time is nothing less than inspiring,” he says.

19. Tech Helps, But Isn’t Required

“It’s much easier to let students explore when they have technology,” Juliani says. “They can reach out to mentors online, they can watch videos—they have so much more opportunity to learn on their own.... We’ve done it in classrooms without technology, but it really amplifies it.”

20. Share Your Success

For his final presentations, Brookhouser doesn’t just let the class listen in, he invites parents, younger students, community leaders, and media to attend. “They all have five minutes to present,” he says, “and that’s their opportunity to shine. The fact that they know they’re going to be presenting their work to others, including their peers, keeps them motivated to do their best work.”