Meet seven international educators who have found success with project learning. By Jennifer Prescott

The scene, at first glance, resembles an exceptionally colorful science fair. Robotic constructions from the Philippines whir and gyrate as they demonstrate the concepts of Newton’s laws of motion, a group of first graders in France light up Twitter with their language practice, and—in a ghastly but effective display of the mechanics of decomposition—a pig’s heart, swarmed by maggots, decays in a fast-motion forensics video. The room hums with a host of foreign accents.

Last November, more than 700 school leaders, educators, and reporters gathered in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the promise of innovative teaching and project learning to change our global future. The event was the Microsoft Partners in Learning Global Forum, and its purpose was for educators worldwide to connect, learn, and collaborate on some of the most exciting innovations in education, particularly in the use of technology. Now in its eighth year, the conference — previously held in South Africa, Brazil, and Hong Kong, among other countries — offers nearly 200 educators from 70 countries the chance to win one of 18 Global Forum Educator Awards. In many cases, the teachers who come to the forum have never left their home country before, have never stepped out of their villages, have never gotten on an airplane.

The result is “an amazing global community of teachers,” says Anthony Salcito, vice president of education for Microsoft. “Many of these teachers feel that they’re different. They’re the ones trying new things and pushing the boundaries. They’re true innovators.” From a virtual travel agency to a school-based music studio to a real-world advertising pitch, the ideas we highlight, from seven amazing teachers, represent inspired teaching at its best. We also suggest ways you can bring innovation to your own classroom. Getting started with project learning is easier than you think!
INSPIRED IDEAS

MAKING MOVIES FROM PRISON
Challenging imprisoned girls to create and film videos on a topic they care about.

“T...
LEARNING FROM SOUND AND RHYTHM

Many of Gareth Ritter’s students at Willows High School in Cardiff, Wales, live in difficult environments. They are turned off by school but they love music. So Ritter had the bright idea to challenge students to compose their own original tracks and then create tutorials for recording various sounds, including guitars, drums, and vocals. Ritter posted the tutorials on YouTube, where they received a surprising 27,000 hits. “My students’ videos were used worldwide,” he says. Ritter also brought to the project an adaptation of Kinect for Xbox 360—a gaming system that allows kids to use their bodies, rather than a mouse or a controller, to manipulate the screen. This tangible style of learning helps reach kids with learning disabilities, who respond to the immersive sensation of being “part” of the lesson at hand. “That’s bringing the outside stuff from home, which they love, into the classroom,” explains Ritter, who used Kinect to test what students had learned in the process of recording sound sources. One hundred percent of the students passed the exam. In what Ritter calls “a massive success story for the classroom.”

TRY IT How can you use technology—and kids’ own interests—to engage students with the curriculum? Ritter’s project began as a tutorial, so you might have students write or film instructions for beating a challenging video game, conducting online research, or designing a mobile app. Let students’ questions, hobbies, and pursuits outside of school lead the way.

TRY IT How can you bring your curriculum into the real world? Can your math class consult on tax prep? Can students write a brochure for a local tourist spot? When kids realize that their efforts can impact others, they become teachers and innovators in their own right.

PLANNING INTERNATIONAL ADVENTURES

Teaching geography through a virtual travel agency where students research, plan, and share advice.

Award-winning teacher Tessa van Zadelhoff left the textbooks on the shelves when it came time to teach her students in Eindhoven, The Netherlands, about geography. Instead, she had her 10-year-olds open a travel agency that operated from the classroom—one in which they researched real trips for friends and relatives. The Bear Travel Agency used Twitter and a blog to dispense travel advice. Students calculated costs using Microsoft Excel and created digital tourist guides, videos, storybooks, and translation booklets. In the process, they learned about European geography and created a vital service that, it could be argued, is worth good money. The kids also figuratively took to the streets to add more value for their “customers.” “We made videos in front of the interactive whiteboard while we were ‘walking’ through the city, using Bing maps’ streetside view,” says van Zadelhoff. One student navigated through the map, while a second narrated travel tips, and a third operated the video camera.

TRY IT How can you bring your curriculum into the real world? Can your math class consult on tax prep? Can students write a brochure for a local tourist spot? When kids realize that their efforts can impact others, they become teachers and innovators in their own right.

TRY IT How can you use technology—and kids’ own interests—to engage students with the curriculum? Ritter’s project began as a tutorial, so you might have students write or film instructions for beating a challenging video game, conducting online research, or designing a mobile app. Let students’ questions, hobbies, and pursuits outside of school lead the way.

TRY IT How can you bring your curriculum into the real world? Can your math class consult on tax prep? Can students write a brochure for a local tourist spot? When kids realize that their efforts can impact others, they become teachers and innovators in their own right.
REAL-WORLD EXECS COMPETING WITH

Making a pitch to a London advertising firm to design an app promoting Olympic sponsors.

After hearing executives at a dinner party bemoan their new hires’ lack of skills, Jennifer King asked her students at Strode’s College in Surrey, England: “Do you want to put our curriculum on hold for a little bit and learn some skills that you’ll eventually need to know in the workplace?” The students agreed: “I didn’t want to fabricate it and make a fake corporation,” explains King. So she approached advertising agency Ogilvy, and convinced the head of digital technologies in London to give her students a chance to pitch a campaign.

The creative brief asked for a mobile phone application to promote the sponsors of the 2012 Olympics. Once a week for six weeks, students abandoned their structured lessons and “went to work” for a full six-hour day. In small teams, they generated ideas, gave one another feedback, and produced a pitch. Simultaneously, the creative teams at Ogilvy were addressing the same challenge. King’s students had to learn organically how to manage their “workday” and follow procedures similar to those of their professional colleagues.

When the project was finished, the class went to London, presented their ideas to Ogilvy, and reflected on the feedback they received.

“We’re now waiting to see if a bit of one of the projects is going to be included in the final app—that would be truly amazing,” says King.

TRY IT Don’t be afraid to reach out to companies and organizations that can give your lessons real-world grounding. You might be surprised by the partnerships you can develop!