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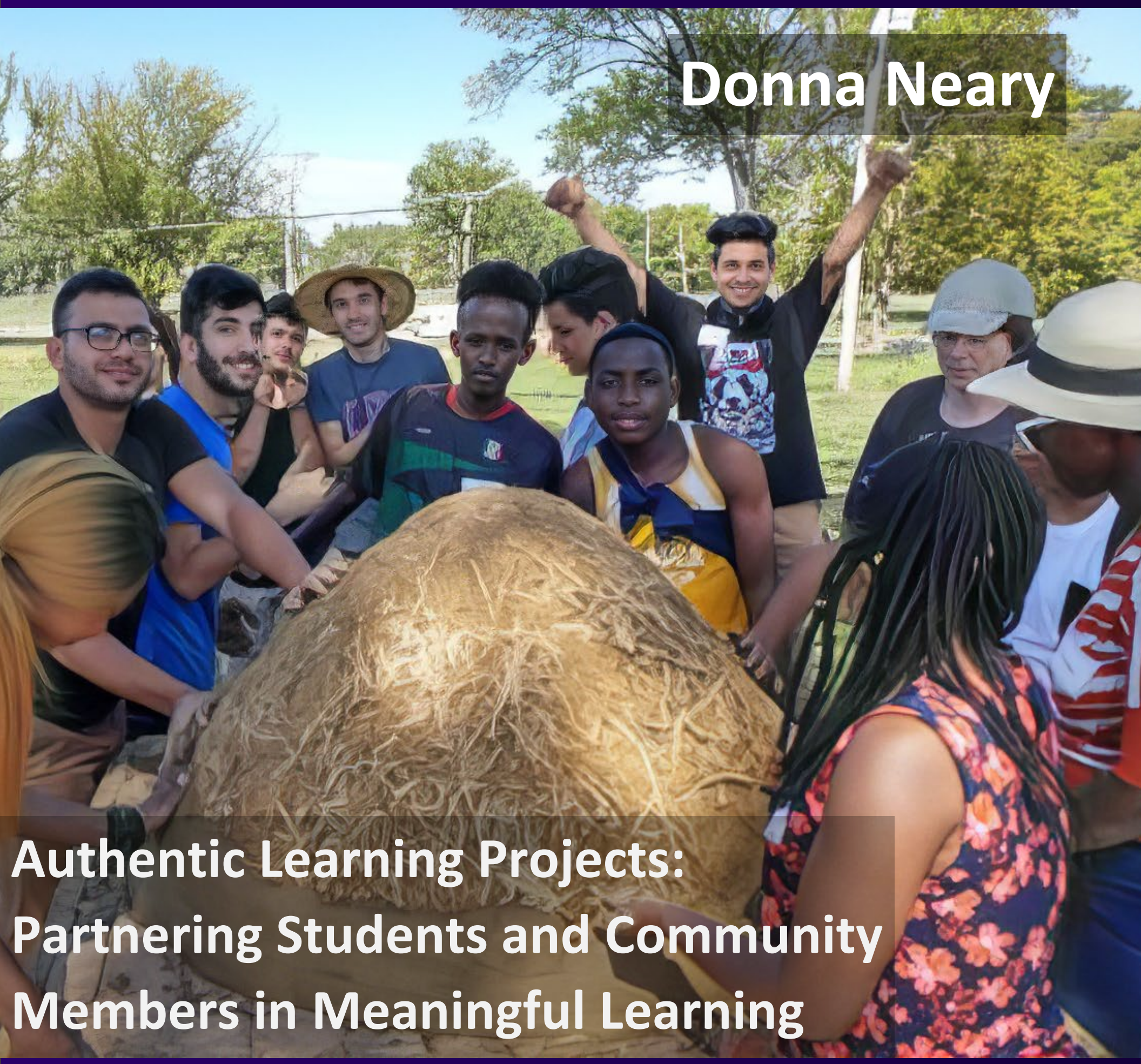

Donna Neary

Authentic Learning Projects: Partnering Students and Community Members in Meaningful Learning

The Worthy Educator

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Authentic Learning Projects: Partnering Students and Community Members in Meaningful Learning

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I have been teaching multilingual, newcomer, immigrant-origin and refugee students for more than a decade. The major take-away of my time in the classroom is that meaningful projects provide students platforms to showcase their skills and knowledge, to think critically and provide connections to their communities past and present, and to our collective future. Furthermore, these projects create a lasting legacy of the work, blazing trails for future students.

My goal is to integrate curriculum standards and design creative applications aligned to them. Every project we complete is connected to compelling questions and is often the culmination of a unit of study. This kind of project-based learning (also known as problem-based learning) supports students with authentic, real world experiences that provide them with the skills they need to contribute to the community after they graduate.

A favorite project of mine resulted from planning for museum a visit for immigrant and refugee students. Once the staff of the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky understood these new students in our community had never been to a museum, they worked with us planning a year-long learning experience. Students were celebrated in an exhibition of their artwork entitled “Lost and Found” in the main hall of the museum on a family Sunday, along with a speaking project entitled “Immigration Stories” that was posted on Soundcloud.com. This connected students’ migration stories to the collections at the museum, with students selecting a work of art that connected to their personal journeys to the United States. By reflecting on their selected works of art, students crafted essays relating the fear, discrimination, poverty and luck they experienced as they made the trek to their new home in our community.

These recordings are in English, or their first or other language that showcased their language acquisition as a superpower. The resulting audio files are poignant, joyful, haunting explorations of human migration and are constructed upon an interdisciplinary study of World History, American History, Civics and the Humanities. Recording a personal essay provides students experience in developing academic language, historical context, and the skills to evaluate and make conclusions about themselves. Even more importantly, they provide students a voice in their community to which they might not otherwise have access..

Great projects result when we plan experiences for students that integrate coursework with our community partners. Former students attended a Title I school within walking distance of an urban farm on the site of demolished public housing. A local non-profit reclaimed the land and began repurposing it for farming, which was its original historic use. A community garden was also located on the site, providing garden plots for neighborhood residents, including many immigrant-origin families and local residents impacted by poverty. We were approached by the garden to take part in a series of lessons on healthy foods, which led to more conversation with its staff that led to a three-year project using the farm as a setting for learning about planting, culture, and community life. Many of our students are from rural backgrounds, and they were excited to be learning outdoors.

Students grew and cooked vegetables while utilizing research, including a study on food insecurity. As a non-profit, the urban farm was multi-pronged, and hired students from our school to help with the work. Taking my students from the classroom to the farm engaged them in multiple sources of information, including the National Geographic Encyclopedia, local cookbooks, and primary source materials about our local neighborhood. In addition they conducted interviews with their family members and chose recipes to include in a digital cookbook, from which many dishes were prepared and served at a community meal. We invited community partners to also bring a dish of their choosing, so that the tables were loaded with foufou, falafel, and Cuban congri right alongside Mawmaws favorite potato salad. Tears rolled down the cheeks of the most seasoned among us as students described what this experience meant to them. The other culminating project in the first year of the program was the construction of an outdoor oven they built of straw and mud called a cob oven. We all learned incredible lessons.

Sometimes projects come in the form of academic competitions. Participating in the Aspen Challenge in 2019 in Louisville brought a heightened level of accountability for students and powerful lessons for teachers as we watched our students step up to the challenges presented to them. Knowing the work we were doing with immigrant-origin students, our school district invited us to field a team of eight English learners to represent our school. The work was grueling, requiring meetings after school and on weekends for six weeks. I worked with a wonderful colleague to coach our team, supporting and guiding their efforts as they planned and hosted a teen immigrant forum. They called themselves “Futurum,” choosing Latin as the central language of learning. Their solutions-based project on making immigrants feel welcome in their new community won them the Best Collaboration Award, overcoming language barriers and academic voids to successfully represent their school and make their coaches exceedingly proud.

I encourage you to search for and imagine which partners across your community want to work with immigrant-origin students. Once we connected with organizations, we often were introduced to others who expressed additional ideas for projects and partnerships beyond our initial thinking. Students' interests also drove projects and competition entries. Because my students were technology savvy and interested in creating digital products and music, they participated in the WE.org film festival in the spring of 2020. My students created two first place winning films, incorporating the past and the present realities of people who migrate to the United States by tapping into their existing knowledge, the study of U.S. and World History, along with their own personal experiences as immigrants and refugees that provided context for their films that other learners did not have. As a result, they completed high school with tangible evidence of their skills.

These and so many other projects provide students opportunities to combine research skills, competencies and content to create authentic products that bring value to their communities. For example, on a unit of the Civil War in United States history; we visited Abraham Lincoln’s Birthplace National Park. They toured the site and got a feel of the man they had been researching for four weeks. They presented their research projects in the park auditorium, gaining an understanding of what it feels like to present to audiences outside of school. My students also staged exhibitions in museums in Louisville and became the first Guatemalan artists to exhibit at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee in its 70-year history. They also invited a Congressman to an open forum where he addressed their concerns and questions as new immigrants in his district. Though not yet able to vote, they asked hard questions concerning their families and their futures.

My work with multilingual learners illustrates the power of prior knowledge as the foundation for learning, with students not only calling on their own experiences but that of generations before them. I am talking about the knowledge that comes from surviving famine and war, enduring refugee camp conditions, overcoming interruptions in their formal education, caring for the elderly and young siblings, and standing bravely and sometimes alone when entering a new school. Students’ in our classes routinely share family and cultural knowledge about events of the past, and inviting their ideas and reflections are often multi-generational in scope. I support the ongoing development of a growth mindset as they learn new words, new foods, and build new relationships with peers. We do this by setting high expectations for everything they do and giving them the space to push themselves, growing through the productive struggle that results in impressive learning artifacts and products including thoughtful essays and responses to ongoing discussions and community service activities.

Multilingual students have their work cut out for them, so how can we as teachers and administrators connect students and grow their sense of belonging to the school and the surrounding community? How can we provide the spaces in which they will thrive?

We can make learning accessible by providing opportunities to use English in real life social and academic settings in projects with clear outcomes:

- We can provide spaces and permission for students become active agents in their learning.
- We can imagine and plan meaningful partnerships that serve both students and the community with mutually beneficial outcomes.
- We can create awareness beyond the school campus by creating internships and apprenticeships beyond these projects that open the door to possible pathways to work and careers.

Planning, organizing, coordinating, following-up and following-through take time, patience and attention to detail to create successful projects. The front-end work is often unseen by students and the community who take part in these wonderfully created exhibitions and presentations, but living in these moments of imagining what can be possible is only topped by the joy of watching students accept academic and social challenges and bring their best selves to the task. Feeling the joy and power unleashed in students who persevere in spite of uncertainty in their learning and in their futures, who are often those who have the most to gain or to lose in all aspects of their lives, and yet are open and receptive to using new tools, new thinking and new approaches to their learning, is something that serves them well the rest of their lives. And in terms of life in their new community, they care about the stories being told about themselves and their families, and they bravely bring their voices to share their truths. Through these projects, the community hears them.

HAMILTON COUNTY SCHOOLS

Donna Neary is a lifelong learner with extensive experience in public history and public education that informs her design of classroom instruction as well as innovative professional development. She sees how the competencies of the historian - inquiry, critical thinking, data analysis and clear writing - support and enhance her work as an educator. Her passion is working with at-risk students in Title I schools, immigrant-origin students, migrants, refugees and new language learners.

Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworhtyeducator.com/journal