

UnCommon Learning

Creating Schools That Work for Kids

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The world today is changing at a fast pace. We are seeing technology advance at a frenetic rate, which is having a powerful impact on our learners. It is not that our students are actually learning differently per se, but the environment in which they are learning is dramatically different. The engaging aspects of technology today and ubiquitous access to information provide constant engagement to learners of all ages. They have embraced this digital world as it provides consistent relevance and meaning through an array of interactive experiences. As a result the job of schools and educators has become exponentially more difficult as a natural disconnect results when students enter their school buildings. This disconnect manifests itself as the school environment is the exact opposite of this engaging world that our learners are now a part of. If students cannot learn the way we now teach or in the conditions that are prevalent, maybe we need to teach the way they learn and create a school environment that more closely aligns with their world.

This book, *UnCommon Learning*, provides a process for schools to initiate sustainable change resulting in a transformation of the learning culture to one that works better and resonates with our students. It lays out the elements necessary for

that we would not have even considered changing our ways. If results were not what our stakeholders wanted, we would hold meetings leading to the development of action plans to get us back on course.

There is still an innate desire to sustain a school structure and function that has remained relatively unchanged for well over a hundred years. This is a problem. We were in a rut and didn't even know it. Luckily change came in the form of a little blue bird that gave me the kick in the butt that I desperately needed back in 2009. Being blessed with an amazing staff, student body, administrative team, and community provided the necessary support needed to move us forward.

This is where I experienced a change in mind-set, which up until this point could best be described as fixed. Carol Dweck (2006) spent decades researching achievement and success, which focused one's mind-set. She found that people who had fixed mind-sets believed that their basic qualities, such as intelligence or talent, were simply fixed traits. As a result they spent time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing it. People possessing fixed mind-sets also believed that talent alone creates success without much effort. Dweck's research proved this to not be the case. On the other hand she found that people possessing growth mind-sets believed that their most basic abilities could be developed through dedication and hard work, with their brains and talent as starting points. From this perspective a love of learning and resilience essential for success leads to accomplishment. As Dweck found, all great people have these qualities and can overcome a fixed mentality through choice and motivation.

Moving from a fixed to a growth mind-set and feeding off the daily inspiration that connected learning provides gave me the fuel to create a shared vision that eventually became a reality as a result of action. I was exposed to a whole new world that, until this point, I didn't know existed. Social media provided a doorway to this world where I saw firsthand schools and educators implementing

and the financial implications of education technology. The findings showed that if effectively implemented, technology programs can lead to improved student achievement and significant return on investment (Project RED, 2015). When given access to appropriate technology used in thoughtful ways, all students—regardless of their respective backgrounds—can make substantial gains in learning and technological readiness (Darling-Hammond, Zieleski, & Goldman, 2014).

Those schools that have focused on increasing student achievement through the positive integration of digital tools have made a broad pedagogical shift: they have focused on enhancing essential skill sets—communication, collaboration, creativity, media literacy, global connectedness, critical thinking, and problem solving—by putting real-world tools into the hands of students. These tools allow students to create artifacts of learning that demonstrate their conceptual mastery. This mastery is not only more individually defined, driven, and produced, but also it enhances students' ability to create and learn more ably in their culture by increasing their digital confidence and expertise. The instructional style that has benefitted them is not one of mandates, directives, and buy-in but one grounded in empowerment, support, and embracement as keys to sustainable change.

A CULTURE MOVING IN A DIFFERENT (BETTER) DIRECTION

Hershey Groff is a history teacher at New Milford High School (NMHS). He believes that incorporating digital tools to increase student engagement while working to develop and extend student competencies is necessary in today's classroom. Additionally, he considers utilizing social media, digital learning games, mobile devices, and interactive educational applications as essential in promoting a classroom environment where engagement and collaboration directly result in increased student achievement and academic performance. Digital tools—used strategically as varied formative and summative



enthusiastic bunch of students who were interested in “making” experiences and who were eager to see a place like this in their school and therefore wanted to contribute. By the end of this initial process, the physical makerspace ended up being a learning environment that encouraged creativity and ideas in designing and constructing a wide variety of 3-D artifacts.

The layout of the makerspace consists of *fixed* stations and *flexible* stations. The fixed stations are areas that are out in the makerspace all of the time for students to walk in, sit down at, and engage with. These include a littleBits Bar, where students have the opportunity to participate in using modular electronics to invent their own creations; a Take-Apart Tech Station (or *breaker space*), where computers are provided and



Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)

Technology seems to be more accessible than ever before. It is common to walk into a typical household these days and see a variety of devices being charged. One of the first things I look for when I go to a friend's house is whether or not any charging cables are readily available in case I need one. Even when we entertain guests, I will go to charge my iPhone and find that someone has already commandeered my charger, much to my chagrin. Many people regularly take some sort of charging apparatus with them wherever they go. Access to technology is by no means isolated only to adults. As devices have become more affordable over the years, parents have bestowed a variety of mobile technologies upon their children. We really are living in a digital age.

As a result of the advances in technology and an increase in Wi-Fi access, schools have slowly begun to respond to this trend. The realization now is that many students possess devices, and it only makes sense to harness and leverage

can be leveraged to provide learning activities and course material to students, including due dates for assignments and information about timetable and room changes. Formative and summative assessments can easily be created and administered to students using free tools. For example, a teacher could assign a paper in Google Docs where he or she could provide real-time feedback. Google Forms could be configured as a self-grading quiz. A blended approach to enabling learning with mobile devices is a sound approach as successful and engaging activities draw on a number of different theories and practices.

Koole's (2009) Framework for the Rational Analysis of Mobile Education (FRAME) model provides a more holistic framework for mobile learning. It is composed of a three-circle Venn diagram comprising the learner aspect (L), the social aspect (S), and the device aspect (D). The learner aspect (L) takes into account a student's cognitive abilities, memory, prior knowledge, emotions, and possible motivations. This aspect describes how learners use what they already know and how they encode, store, and transfer information. This aspect also draws upon learning theories regarding knowledge transfer and learning by discovery. The social aspect (S) takes into account the processes of social interaction and cooperation. Students must follow the rules of cooperation to communicate, which enables them to exchange information, acquire knowledge, and sustain cultural practices. The device aspect (D) refers to the physical, technical, and functional characteristics of a mobile device. The physical characteristics include input and output capabilities as well as processes internal to the machine such as storage capabilities, power, processor speed, compatibility, and expandability.

In this framework, mobile learning is a combination of the interactions among learners, their devices, and other people. Koole provides a useful checklist that schools and educators can refer to when looking to integrate mobile