

Solutions for Modern Learning

The End of School as We Know It



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Introduction:

What's Going on Here?

Joshua saw himself as a learner—a fifteen-year-old modern learner—not that he ever called himself that. For a long time, he had been unsure of how that was reflected in his time at school; learning and school seemed to be contradictory ideas. For many of his schoolmates, school was about being with friends and having fun. Every now and then, a school bell would interrupt, and they'd be distracted for forty or fifty minutes in a classroom before getting back to the important business of hanging out. But Joshua took life a bit more seriously. He was very aware of himself and his place in the world. In that regard, school didn't make much sense to him.

He already had the learning piece in place; that was something he did for himself, and he knew he was good at. But he wasn't so good at school. His teachers became frustrated with him at times. "Joshua," they would say, "you haven't answered the question." As if he didn't know. He just couldn't see the point of much of what he was asked to do at school. Instead, he spent far more time researching the answers to questions that he felt warranted his time.

"It's not just a question of doing what you want to do, Joshua," his parents would say. "Your teachers think you have a lot of potential, but you don't seem to want to apply yourself in the ways they feel will give the best results." *Results?* he thought. *Who really cares?* He sure didn't. He knew he could get a reasonable grade for the work he did, but he was far more interested in pursuing exciting ideas in more depth than was required for a simple test or exam, even if the ideas weren't directly related to that thing they called the curriculum.

One day it dawned on him, just as he was about to enter his physics class, why he felt this frustration with school. As a learner, he wanted to learn. But school was about becoming an "educated person." He realized that being educated was actually something someone did *to* him. This was what people believed the role of school was: to educate you. Finally it all made sense.

As he contemplated his great insight, Joshua was oblivious to most of what happened in the first half of that physics class, but in the second half, he took on a whole new perspective. He could see, right before his eyes, the reality of what

he had discovered: here he was, curious and hungry for ideas, stuck in a class with twenty-four of his classmates, most of whom saw the whole experience as time away from the things that really mattered. Each day, they would all be doing the same things, hearing the same information from the same teacher, and then it was over until the next lesson.

Why would they not want to be in control? he wondered. *Why wouldn't they want to direct their time and think in directions that were of interest or intrigue to them? Why would they settle for getting educated when they could be learning for themselves, like I do?*

He looked around the room at his classmates.

Surely, thought Joshua, *this isn't the way it is meant to be . . . or is it? Is this really what we all should be doing with our time in school? Or are we just doing this because our parents did it and their parents before them? Surely, we can do better.*

Understanding the Role of School

This is not a book about the end of school as we know it; however, it could be, if the case I outline falls on deaf ears. I genuinely do fear time is running out.

Rather, this is a book about the change in context we are experiencing in both schools and their role in the wider world. It calls for us to urgently reflect, re-examine, and reimagine what the role of school should and could be in this rapidly changing, highly connected, digitally rich world our students are growing up in. While it accepts the premise that there is still a place for schools in our modern society, it also asserts the need for us to let go of many of our beliefs and assumptions about school's role in society and challenges us to be far more ambitious and bold in reimagining what now might be possible.

School has too often been seen as more of a rite of passage than a place of learning, yet along the way, we have desperately hung on to the rites and rituals of schooling as if our lives, and the lives of our young people, depended on it. Over time, we've allowed our devotion to the idea of school to overtake any rational discussion about its relevance in today's world, or even whether there are better alternatives to our current models.

We need to have that discussion.

The context in which we developed our intellectual framework about schools has shifted dramatically, and with it the model of schooling we have had since the early 20th century now appears to be breaking down. What if the very assumptions we based that original model on are now no longer valid?

It could be argued that, as far as schools are concerned, we are in the middle of what Thomas Kuhn (1962) calls a *model crisis*. According to Kuhn, such a crisis occurs when insignificant flaws in a model suddenly become significant. With each

new flaw, the model weakens until the flaws become so excessive that the model breaks. It can no longer serve as a reliable way of meeting the needs for which it was created, and any attempts to patch the model will fail.

Ultimately, the model crisis leads to disbelief, anguish, and denial until finally we see what Kuhn calls a *model revolution*, where serious candidates for a new model emerge. This represents a genuine paradigm shift, not just a cliché or fad-dish idea. It's a revolution or transformation because the new model is so radically different from the old one.

To me, Kuhn's theory now sounds increasingly relevant to the story of schools. The flaws are becoming obvious, and an example can be seen in the study of 1,500 classrooms referenced in Mike Schmoker's 2006 book *Results Now*. Schmoker writes that 85 percent of these classrooms engage fewer than 50 percent of the students. That is to say, only 15 percent of the classrooms had more than half of the class at least paying attention to the lesson. The international benchmarking tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), ironically also highlight these flaws. These tests celebrate so-called "high performing" schools in places such as Korea, Singapore, and Shanghai, while ignoring the overwhelming contribution of large-scale private tutoring as a supplement to their formal schooling (Mundy, 2014). Such tutoring masks the ineffectiveness of the traditional model of schooling, and accordingly, misleads politicians and policymakers into believing it is still valid.

Disengagement, disenchantment, and dropouts are not the only indicators; after nearly two decades of formal schooling, too many graduates find that their skills are no match for the contemporary work environment, which contrasts brutally with their life in school. A survey by the staffing firm Adecco finds that 44 percent of respondents cited soft skills—such as communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration—as the areas most lacking (White, 2013). Despite the availability of jobs, employers are simply dissatisfied with applicants' skill sets; 27 percent reported that they have left a vacancy open in the past year because they could not find anyone with the right skills (Mourshed, Patel, & Suder, 2014). While to some extent this can be explained by poor labor market planning, "a wide margin of managers also say today's applicants can't think critically and creatively, solve problems or write well" (White, 2013).

The time has come to explore other options, reconsider *every* aspect of school as we know it in light of what's now best for our students, and discern whether school as we know it is school as it could be—and inevitably school as it should be.

Finding a Way Forward

This book is about creating a strategy that supports schools looking to better engage modern learners. It's about supporting teachers and school leaders who are aware of and acknowledge the changes in our modern learners' world and who want to create a response for schools that maintains their relevance, influence, and impact on the lives of these young people.

It seeks to do so in a way that is aligned with the current environment within our schools while simultaneously challenging many of the accepted practices and assumptions. The approach should not be overwhelming, but it does require commitment and resolve. It is first and foremost about building a shared understanding across a school community around three core ideas.

The overarching strategy highlighted in this book is, therefore, built around three essential questions:

1. How do students learn, and under what conditions do you believe they learn best?
2. What does digital richness now make possible for modern learners, and what are the implications for contemporary teaching and learning?
3. What building blocks are necessary for a modern learning environment that allows our learners to leverage and amplify the opportunities now afforded to them in this digitally rich world?

These questions, when explored deeply, can be used to guide critical conversations across a school and ultimately deliver a result that best meets the needs of individual school communities.

To begin this discussion, chapter 1 provides the background knowledge necessary to draw ideas and insights and make better decisions regarding responses to the essential questions. It explores the reasons why previous attempts at school reform have failed.

The next three chapters take a look at how we should go about redesigning schools for modern learning in the context of the three essential questions. Chapter 2 uses the first essential question—How do students learn, and under what conditions do you believe they learn best?—to clarify beliefs about learning. Chapter 3 digs into the second essential question—What does digital richness now make possible for modern learners, and what are the implications for contemporary teaching and learning?—by exploring new pedagogies for modern learning and examining possible shifts in curricula. Chapter 4 discusses the final essential question—What building blocks are necessary for a modern learning environment that allows our learners to leverage and amplify the opportunities now afforded to them in this digitally rich world?—and completely reimagines the architecture of learning.

Chapter 5 summarizes the challenges facing modern learning and looks forward to what schools could be if the three essential questions are used as guideposts. Finally, I close the book with a message to students, a modern learner's commencement speech, addressing the importance of moving forward and realizing their true potential and passions.

There has never been a more inspiring time to be a teacher, a more challenging time to be a leader, or a more exciting time to be a learner. This book seeks to give educators the perspective and language to drive conversation throughout their schools. School, policy, and political leaders who are increasingly aware of the need to rethink and challenge many of the assumptions around which traditional schooling was created can also use this book to move forward. In addition, this book is for parents who sense that we are living in times when the sort of schooling students receive is no longer appropriate or adequate for their children.

Regardless of its purpose for you, this book can never be a panacea for inaction. For too long we have been comforted by process when what we have needed is impact. Nothing will happen without a commitment to transformation that embraces the whole school community, and none of that is possible without leadership. We will move no further toward creating exceptional education experiences for our students if we fail to acknowledge the impact of inspirational leaders who are focused on continuous improvement and sustainable transformation.

My hope is this book will support those modern learners who are seeking to do just that and will help them create the sorts of modern learning environments our students so urgently need.