



## **Uncommon Learning** Initiating Sustainable Change for a Student-Focused Culture and Learning Environment by Eric Sheninger

**T**he world today is changing at a fast pace. Technology is advancing at a frenetic rate and powerfully impacting our learners. Our students are not actually learning differently, per se, but the environments in which they learn are 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 and an array of interactive experiences.

As a result of this transformation, the job of schools and educators has become exponentially more difficult. Why? Because a natural disconnect occurs when students enter their school buildings. And why is that? Because the school environment is the exact opposite of the engaging world of which our learners are now a part. If students cannot learn in the ways we are familiar with teaching or in the environment as we might want them to be, we need to teach the way they learn and create a school environment that more closely aligns with their world.

In my latest book, *Uncommon Learning: Creating Schools That Work for Kids*, I provide a blueprint for schools to initiate sustainable change in the learning culture, a culture that works better and resonates more deeply with our students. *Uncommon Learning* lays out the elements essential for establishing initiatives that will enhance learning while increasing relevance and personalizing the school and learning experiences for all students.

### **What is Uncommon Learning?**

Uncommon learning refers to initiatives and pedagogical techniques that are not present in scale in a typical school. If currently present, they are more likely to be isolated practices that have not become systematically embedded as part of school or district culture. This book shows how to systematically embed them and benefit from them.

These initiatives and approaches outline and demonstrate how students can:

- Use real-world tools to do real-world work
- Focus on developing skill sets that society demands
- Respond to student interests
- Empower students to be owners of their learning
- Focus on ways to create an environment that is more reflective of the current digital worlds

They take advantage of an emphasis on deeper learning that new national and state standards provide while allowing students to demonstrate mastery in ways that not only prove attainment but also afford them the ability to acquire and apply skill sets necessary in today's digital worlds. New standards are not seen as impediments but rather as opportunities for students to demonstrate conceptual mastery in more authentic ways.

### **The Role of Technology in Education**

When it comes to technology in general, the overall goal is to support learning, not drive instruction. Currently, digital learning initiatives often misguidedly focus on how technology actually accomplishes this. Schools invest billions of dollars to purchase technology with no real thought as to how it is actually impacting learning. Uncommon learning moves past a bells-and-whistles approach to a true integration of technology that ensures that learning is deeply impacted as well as monitored and validated through quality assessments.

The right school and learning culture focuses on technology as a tool to enhance learning in a variety of ways. When technology is integrated with purpose, students can create artifacts to demonstrate conceptual mastery, apply an array of acquired skills, illustrate the construction of new knowledge, and be empowered to take ownership over their learning. When technology is integrated in this way it can also increase relevance

and make the curriculum more contextual. The right culture also provides learning experiences that are aligned to student interests and passions and prepares them to succeed in jobs that may not have even been created yet.

Uncommon learning initiatives complement the work that is already taking place in schools, allowing students to clearly see the value in their learning. Regardless of the standards a school or district is using, uncommon learning initiatives with and without technology can be integrated seamlessly to foster deeper learning. Examples of initiatives that are detailed in the book include:

**Digital pedagogy for deeper learning:** Today's learners yearn to use real-world tools to do real-world work. Effective digital learning environments focus on learning outcomes as opposed to the tools themselves.

**Makerspaces:** These spaces provide cost-effective ways for any school to transform dull or underutilized spaces into vibrant learning environments. These spaces compel students to create, tinker, invent, problem solve, collaborate, and think to learn. Makerspaces can be created on any budget and motivate students to learn on their own time.

**Blended and virtual learning:** Traditional schooling, as dictated by brick-and-mortar buildings and mainstay pedagogical techniques, no longer meets the diverse learning needs of all students. Both blended and virtual learning opportunities can help to personalize and individualize instruction with technology.

**Bring your own device (BYOD) and mobile learning:** Many students now possess a powerful learning tool in the form of mobile technology. This chapter will address the potential challenges and advantages of implementing a BYOD initiative. Issues such as equity, infrastructure, policy development, digital responsibility, pedagogy, and tools will be discussed. The end result is creating an environment that empowers students to use the tools they possess as mobile learning devices to enhance learning, increase productivity, develop positive digital footprints, and conduct better research.

**Digital badges and micro-credentials:** Digital badges are beginning to be embraced as a means to acknowledge a particular skill, accomplishment, or quality associated with learning. Schools have begun to integrate digital badges to acknowledge the informal learning of teachers and formal learning of students.

**Academies and smaller learning communities:** These programs represent a bold vision and direction based on student interests, national and global need, and intangible skill sets necessary for success. Schools can create their own unique academy programs on a limited budget to expand course offerings, form mutually beneficial partnerships, and provide authentic learning experiences.

**Connected learning:** Educators today can learn anytime, from anywhere, with anyone they choose. This paradigm shift eliminates the notion of schools being silos of information and educators feeling that they reside on isolated learning islands. Connected learning shatters the construct of traditional learning options such as conferences and workshops as the only viable means for professional growth.

### Sustaining Success

For change to be successful, it must be sustained. As educators, we must not only be willing to see the process through, but we must also create conditions that promote a change in mentality. When educators understand why change is needed and are provided with a clear focus for implementation, they are then in a position to take calculated risks. And when they know they are supported, an inherent appreciation and value for the change evolves with each resulting success.

For more information on *Uncommon Learning*, or to purchase, click [here](#).

*Note: The content in this publication was adapted from Uncommon Learning by the author.*

### About the Author

**Eric Sheninger** is a Senior Fellow and Thought Leader on Digital Leadership at the International Center for Leadership in Education. Prior to joining ICLE, he was the principal at New Milford High School in New Jersey, where he emerged as an innovative leader in the use of social media and Web 2.0 technology as tools to engage students, improve communication with stakeholders, and help educators grow professionally. He is the author of *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* and *Uncommon Learning: Creating Schools That Work for Kids*.