



Meg Ormiston: Focusing on Student-Led Change with Now Learning

Meg Ormiston 00:07

Hello, and welcome to my session, Now Learning. I am Meg Ormiston, and I am focused on change. And here I am, I've been in education for many, many years starting as a classroom teacher teaching second grade, third grade, fourth grade, sixth grade, math k-8, computers k-8. And along the journey, I've also become a consultant and I've also written 12 books. My latest and most ambitious, crazy project has been the Now classrooms series, where their grade bands books talking about enhancing teaching and learning using digital tools. The greatest part about this project was not writing five books at one time; it was collaborating with 26 of the most awesome practicing educators in the Chicagoland area.

And wow, as we collaborated, we really talked about the future of learning, and what can we do? And what changes can we do right now? Get it? And so we really, we know where in all different systems, but what kind of change can we do now? And so everything I work on is based on the arrow. And this is my arrow, where on the left, we have teacher driven classrooms, where very traditional teacher at the board talking, teacher doing all the work, teacher exhausted. On the far right, I want to create student-driven now classrooms where students are empowered, where they are making decisions, setting goals. This can be done. And in this session, I want to show how you can take this arrow, and you can do this, wherever you are. I know it can be done, because we're doing it. And that's what I want to paint today is how are we doing it and who are we doing it with? And what does it really look like?

So a big part of all that work with the arrow is the four C's of collaboration, very important, communication in all different forms, creativity, we have to bring more creativity in our classrooms, and critical thinking. These are my four C's. And I want you to remember these as we go through and I show you lots of great images, as I tell you the story about how we can do this. So never doubt never, never doubt that just a small thoughtful group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. So when I think about this, I'm going to be painting a picture of a very small group that started a revolution. And I'm really excited. And here's our group, all right. And so there's me in the middle, and to the left of me is Rob Bright, and over to



the right is Marvin Childress. And everything started, this crazy journey started, when Marvin and I sat on the iLearn committee together and I was one of the facilitators. Now I asked students to come to the committee meeting and tell us about how they learn outside of school. One middle school boy got up and told us how he learns to code at home just for fun, he enjoys it. Another tried to explain to the group what Twitch was. And if this continued, and then all of a sudden Marvin stands up right in the middle of meeting goes, we are boring them to death. Look what they're doing outside of school to learn. We have to change.

And so we started a revolution in their elementary school, Rob and Marvin are fifth grade teachers. So we started the revolution, with small mighty bunch of kids that started the Tech Club, the Lincoln Tech Club. Now as you look at these beautiful pictures of some of the greatest kids, you will notice beautiful furniture. We're in the part of the building that had just been remodeled and added on. And their vision was this active learning. And so now we have these great fifth graders actually doing the learning that type of learning in this environment. So yes, it is as beautiful as it looks. So small and mighty team you are looking at the small and mighty team up there. There's four or five leaders. And what this team did is we started to empower them very informally. Behind Maurice in the corner you can see there is a green screen room, amazing, lights, almost soundproof, amazing, amazing equipment and things like that.

Well, this small mighty group, we started, say, "Hey, what could we do that could be something that we could help the whole building. And this building is very into service, and helping others. And so we started talking about forming a club that can help the whole building use technology. And on the screen, what you're seeing is one of their first projects, was working with kindergarteners to talk about the rules on the new playground. So the older kids, the fifth graders, worked with the younger students in the green screen room to produce a movie about the rules of the playground. That was one of the things. So what this tech club decided to do was be a service club. They're the four leaders now, we have them up front. They wanted to be a service club for the whole building. So teachers could try some technology projects, and they would have this team of fifth graders that could come and help them pull off that project. That teacher could do that in kindergarten, but it would have been really hard. And so they swoop in, everybody was broken up in teams, and they would swoop in and help the teacher. What they created was amazing.

Now, this district has worked very, very, very hard for many years to get devices in the hands of all students. So everyone, K through, well now K through five, but it was



originally third through five had an iPad. And then we use that to do all different amazing things. So yes, those chairs do get a little annoying, just so you know. One of the cool things is we stepped back and we empowered the students. We did not speak at the meetings unless we had to, you know, clarify something. But this was all student led and student empowered. And that's to me, one of the most exciting things about everything. But all the things I always talk about is have your work shared with an authentic audience. And that made a huge difference when they knew that their project that their group was working on was going to end up on the big screen, and also be seen beyond the walls of the buildings. So the adults really stood in the back and let the leadership of the students. You can see one group is in the green screen room doing their filming. We had props, we had all different things. It was amazing.

And two days before no, yes, one day before, we had to close the schools for the pandemic, we, I was so proud of this group, they were given the most prestigious award in District 97. This is in Oak Park, Illinois, just outside of Chicago. And they won this very prestigious award. But one of the things that I failed to mention earlier is they had, this is all the fifth grade classrooms, they had 85% of the students skip recess once a week to come to Tech Club. Many came multiple times a week so they can work on their projects. If you don't know, fifth graders giving up lunch recess is pretty amazing, to get 85% of the grade to come. So yay, they won an award. It was fantastic. But what was most important is their work went beyond the walls of their school.

Well, we didn't stop at Tech Club. We went, so we wanted to get the four C's into the classrooms. So we wanted to really bring this to instruction also. So by creating the Tech Club, we created this environment of empowerment for students, that they felt like they could contribute, they can help. And the whole idea of being a service organization, it spread through the building like wildfire. It was teachers sending messages, stopping kids in the hall, "Can you help me do this? Can you do this?" So exciting. The energy was incredible. So here we are in Marvin's classroom, I know, look at the awesome furniture, look at the whiteboards everywhere. But we wanted to bring those four C's to instruction. So what we did is we started with math, and we started with math. I was a math coach for a long time and we've wanted to really focus our work. And so one of the huge things when we look at the four C's, the collaboration and the communication really, well not much creativity or probably critical thinking, was really going on in their traditional classrooms. But after Marvin had his "Aha, we're boring them," we, I worked very, very closely with both Marvin and Rob. It worked out great, these beautiful classrooms were right next to each other. And they, so we did a lot of shifting of students back and forth. But one thing we did, specifically in math, is we did not track



the students. So traditionally, in this building, they had been high math, low math. That just sends me a cringe just to even talk about that. But that's that, traditionally. We said, "No, we're going to keep these, we're going to pull these two groups. And we're going to do math in a different way."

And this was hard. And this, we had to build a lot of trust. And Marvin is one of the best storytellers I have ever met. And we had to limit his talking, and let the students do the hard work of the figuring it out. And we had good days, and we had not so good days, but that's okay. We kept going and we kept persevering. And this might look chaotic to you, but it actually is very focused work. But what it is, is we're making learning very visible, where groups of students are collaborating together, they're talking about the math, and we're really talking about mistakes, making mistakes, visually representing information; we're talking about all different things. So the groups were, they're not leveled groups; they were all mixed together. And there was so much talking and so much collaborating. But it was very visual, where in the past, a student who was really struggling could kind of hide maybe in the back of the room. But here, we have to talk through things. And it was very, very, very frustrating for a lot of the kids because they wanted us, the adults, to just give them the answer and move on. And we would not give them the answer. We started off right away by saying if we have an answer, you have a calculator on your iPad right in front of you. We're not looking for one answer. If you are going to use your iPad to get the answer, you could start at the answer and work backwards to show us. And so they really struggled with this.

This took, this whole collaborative piece took us a lot more time to develop. These students, at fifth grade, they were used to sitting in groups, but they weren't used to collaborating. And they weren't used to struggling. They kept looking at us for us to give them the answer. And when continually we put it back on their group, and then we did a lot of, "Well, if your group can't solve it, where are you getting stuck? Go seek help." What we found is our really, our high-high math students, when they had to explain it to somebody else, and help that other person really understand it, they're, I'm just gonna throw out test scores, their test scores went even higher. And everybody improved by watching each other learn, and think, and struggle, and demonstrate things in different ways. We repaired a lot of comprehension, I'm gonna say about math, that they were really, really stuck and old routines. We added a visual, we found that these students loved to be in front of the green screen, not everybody. There was a lot of people that chose to be the photographer, the producer, and now we're back in the green screen room, and you can see that their equipment is awesome. And these are, there's an iPad in there. This is called the pad caster.



So the pad caster, you can Google it and find out there's different things. But we had mics and we had multiple microphones, we had lights, we had all different things. And who became the experts at it? The students. I can't tell you how many hours we spent in here just working on setting up the equipment. It came in a backpack and we had to figure it all out. And it wasn't, we had to call on the tech person maybe once. The students were able to figure it out. Of course, we did watch hundreds of YouTube videos, but the students were able to figure it out. What we did is we tied the tech to the math, is we had the students create real live hooks is what we called them. So what they did is they would, each team would have to pick one problem. And they would have to make a real world connection to that problem.

That was much harder for them than just trying to figure out the problem. They're like, well, try to visually represent it. So in this one, they were, they were filling something in front of the green screen. And not explaining how to do the problem. But how, like more number-sense kind of thing. And so this was always the most exciting part, we did figure out very quickly, that they loved this part so much, that we had to make sure that they did their work in their group work before they could go film their hooks. So we learned a lot.

The collaborative piece was I where I think we saw the biggest growth. And by focusing on those four C's, in math, we were able to build their confidence, like you can't believe. Many of the students that were completely disengaged with math in the past, their earlier teachers were like what, and when we would share what we're doing, or they would stop in the hall and see what was happening was students. Now, we might have been the only group that was disappointed that there wasn't state testing during the pandemic, because we were seeing such incredible growth. We started working together in early September. And we did they took an assessment at the early January. And we saw some gains. But this isn't what we really truly saw. We saw even more of that. How about two students achieve more than two years growth in one semester?

We had subgroups that were African American IEP students. One student, she made 19 points of growth. She had it, but it finally came together when she could collaborate and talk about it. I loved her, that the feedback from her parents and how she just shined because of this work and, and how she just really was thriving in this environment. And in so, I think our test scores would have gone through the roof. Well, we know, because we've tracked the kids following them a year. Many of them were able to skip a grade level of math and went up to the next one. So we saw some real growth.



I mentioned earlier about our higher students; we saw growth in everybody. And so it's so exciting to take that empowering, that starting with that club and that student leadership piece, I think was really important with the Tech Club, as it translated to math instruction in the classroom.

Alright, let's get back to the arrow. And in the arrow, you can see the shift and that shift to empower. I've got to tell you, it takes time. This, students were used to sitting, passively listening to the teacher, doing their homework. They weren't used to their thinking out loud. So this shift is where we want to go, this is my life passion. And it takes people a while, especially if they're very much on the left to see what could happen on the right. And so getting ready for next year, we are going to try to pull in more fifth grade teachers. And we are going to commit to some professional development this summer. And one thing, that this just came out, teach creativity with Adobe and Khan Academy. It is a class for teachers, class for anybody. But we are going to take the class together. I've already enrolled and I've already started. I'm really excited because they take the four C's, but there's projects that go into everything. There's a project of math and in science, and the students use the Adobe Suite to create all different things. So they're learning real world tools in the classroom, I cannot wait to get through this class. It's a, it's going to take 20 hours. So it is a commitment. But it's out there and I'm excited to go work with our team to do this.

We are also going to take an online course through Stanford. We're not sure which one we're going to pick yet. But we are going to commit to this to really focus on mathematical mindsets. And I have created a number of different courses. But we're gonna really focus on the mindset, the whole idea of making mistakes is good. And what we're also going to do is we are going to have our students take a class from Stanford. How cool is this? So starting right at the beginning of the year, there's six sessions. And they're short, but there's all different experiences. And this is with Professor Jo Bowler. She is incredible. And she's my number one math person right now. But she also works with Carol Dweck, Dr. Carol Dweck, at Stanford, focusing on mindset. So we've got the math, we've got the mindset, I'm really excited for our students to have this opportunity to take this free course.

And so if you want more information, I want you to go over to you cubed, that is their website. And then you'll find out more about the classes for teachers, and the class for students. So we're, this work and the tasks and the math things, that're here are really amazing. So enjoy those online courses. So that's how we're going to get ready for next



year. I've also designed two courses, and these are available to anyone. And these are reimagine the future of learning. Take a look at those topics on the right. They're, each of them are about an hour long video with follow up and discussions. Now who owns learning? I think after the pandemic, or whatever next year looks like, I hope that we've learned that our students are very, very capable. And we can shift and empower a lot of our students, separating learning from schooling. The learning that's happening outside of school is amazing. So let's celebrate that. And know that learning can be anywhere. And I want students creating, I hope you can catch that through this, that creating, be it in front of a green screen, be it whatever it is, and learning and growing through meaningful feedback. And I, that's not just feedback from the teacher, that's feedback from your peers. And then everything learning accelerated with technology tools. So that's one class.

This is another class. These were designed for teachers, empowering learners, creating flexible thinkers, and really want to focus on learning how to learn. So really focusing on the cognitive science about the brain and how we can stretch the brain. Seeking knowledge online and off is really important. Is it a credible source? How do you know? How do you identify it? So we really want to get the students to be able to be empowered to know. Now, have you ever heard of project management being taught? But they need to know how to do projects and how to manage their time. So that's a that's another course, part of my course. And then I want those students in those beautiful rooms or wherever they are, I want them goal setting and reflecting and always knowing exactly where they're going. And then, what technology can we use now? Some of the tools that came out during our pandemic learning, are we going to continue to use them? I hope so. And some, I'm not sure if I ever want to Zoom again. But we'll see. All right, my courses, I'm excited. They're going to all be developed, delivered this year through a network. And I'm so excited to report that I actually have my own app. And I am using Mighty Networks to deliver this, but also to unite everybody from all the courses into a community, because we have to remember, learning is social. You saw it with these kids, they gave up their recess. Now let's empower our teachers and let them collaborate and communicate with their colleagues. So I'm really excited I have an app.

So the arrow, it drives everything. And so really, if you just have one, two, five teachers one grade level, start. Start the movement. When we get things going, you will be shocked at how quickly students confidence and everything else. And it's more fun. So thank you so much for spending time with me. And please please reach out: meg@techteachers.com Reach out to me on Twitter, LinkedIn. Reach out if you want to dig deeper into anything. If you want to say, "This is never gonna work, Meg, you're



crazy." I'm all good, you can argue with me all the time. But if you want some guidance, this is one way that we can create student leadership. This is one way we can create a school within a school kind of thing. This is one way that we can change the future. Thank you so much for joining me for this session.