

THE PRINCIPAL OF CHANGE

STORIES OF LEARNING AND LEADING

THE #INNOVATORSMINDSET: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM CARLY RAE JEPSEN AND THE HARVARD BASEBALL TEAM #CE15

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[GEORGE](#)

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The following excerpt is from my new book, [The Innovator's Mindset: Empower Learning, Unleash Talent, and Lead a Culture of Creativity](#), which will be published this month (October 2015) by [DBC, Inc.](#) This same post has also been [shared on Edsurge as well](#).

I walked into the room and could tell right away.

I had never met the teacher, Jeff Unruh, before and knew very little about him, but the atmosphere in his classroom spoke of his commitment and passion. Turning to the colleague who was with me, I asked, “Do you think he is on Twitter?” I wanted her to make an educated guess, and her thoughts were the same as mine: definitely.

How did we know? Everywhere we looked, we could see the marks of connection, collaboration, and, yes, innovation.

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Unique seating spaces, and an environment that encouraged students to take risks and think differently gave clues of this teacher’s values. Notices about “Genius Hour” and the school’s recent “Maker Faire” were prominently displayed. And his class was learning how to play chess with a master player, who also happened to be a grandparent of one of the students.

Notice that I haven’t mentioned anything about technology in this classroom. While students had access to computers, it was the learning environment that was different. It offered multiple, amazing opportunities for learning tailored to reach students where they were at, and tap into their strengths and passions.

I asked the teacher if he was on Twitter. He said yes, but explained that he didn’t share that much online. What he appreciated most was the information and people it gave him access to. I could see how that information had been integrated to make his classroom look inviting and engaging. But when I asked if using Twitter had had an impact on his classroom, he thought for a moment and likened it to the “boiling frog” anecdote; gradual changes had helped him get to where he was now. Just by being a “lurker” on Twitter, he’d been inspired to take small steps that made a noticeable difference.

Now, I am not saying that if you are not on Twitter, you are ineffective. Being on Twitter doesn't make you a great teacher any more than not being on Twitter makes you ineffective. There are a lot of great teachers who do some pretty amazing things despite choosing not to connect online. That said, Twitter and other social media give you 24/7 access to new ideas and interactions with forward-thinking teachers. A network helps people become better. How could it not?

Innovation's hard work. It's based on hundreds of hours of research, of practice. Absent desire, not going to happen.

Looking at this teacher's classroom, I realized it looked nothing like my own when I first started teaching. Honestly, I did not have the same information available that educators do now. I had the teachers in my school to bounce ideas off of; but compared to the global conversations that now occur daily, I was fairly isolated. Today, isolation is a choice. Our connectivity and learning opportunities have changed in recent years, and, thankfully, teachers are taking advantage of those changes to benefit themselves and, more importantly, their students. We have access to not only information but also to each other. We need to tap into that.

Call Me Maybe?

I apologize for what I am about to do right now, but do you remember the song [Call Me Maybe](#) from 2012? Carly Rae Jespen's viral hit seemed to be all over the place. If you turned on the radio, there it was. If you went on to social media, there it was. It became for many (including myself) a song that you hated, yet knew all of the words to. There have been catchy songs before, but this spread quickly—not unlike a plague.

In addition to being catchy, the song was also successful because the audience did not simply listen to it, they recreated and remixed it. If you didn't like the original, you might have liked the version done by the [Harvard Baseball team](#) in a van, or [Jimmy Fallon's version](#) using instruments from an elementary music classroom, [Sesame Street's version](#) involving the Cookie Monster, or even the remix of [President Obama singing](#) every word of the song—which someone created by taking snippets from his speech and aligning them with the song. I hated the song until I saw Jimmy Fallon's version, which appealed to the teacher side of me. After hearing it, I even purchased the original. The unique versions of the song somehow pushed listeners back to what the original artist had created.

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The parodies and variations that are common today are quite a change from traditional copyright thinking. The old mindset of artists was, "If you copy or revise my work, you take away my opportunity to make a

living.” Now, the ability to remix and reshare, creates a culture where everyone can win. In Lawrence Lessig’s TED Talk titled, [Laws That Choke Creativity](#), he spoke about the difference between my generation (and those more seasoned than me) and the younger generations. He explained, “We made mixed tapes; they remix music. We watched TV; they make TV.” And because that happens, professionals benefit from the mass sharing, and amateurs enjoy and learn from the ability to freely create. The lines between “amateur” and “professional” have blurred. Admittedly, some professional artists may see this blurring as a risk. In contrast, those with an abundance mentality know that this new era allows them to tap into different people’s unique strengths and create a more powerful product or brand.

So what does this have to do with education? Everything. Chris Anderson, the entrepreneur who reinvented TED Talks, discussed the idea of [Crowd Accelerated Innovation](#) in his [2010 TED Talk](#). Pointing to the example of dancing, he noted that the ability to see dancing through videos has accelerated people’s skills as well as the popularity of the art form. YouTube makes it possible, he notes, for people to be self-taught. And, at the same time, the visibility it provides has raised the bar for excellence. Anderson even acknowledged that seeing great talks by others inspired TED speakers to create more powerful talks themselves. Anderson noted three key elements to Crowd Accelerated Innovation:

1. People who share a common interest. “The bigger the crowd, the more potential innovators there are. That’s important, but actually most people in the crowd occupy these other roles. They’re creating the ecosystem from which innovation emerges.”
2. Visibility to see what others are doing. “You need clear, open visibility of what the best people in that crowd are capable of, because that is how you will learn how you will be empowered to participate.”
3. Desire to change, grow, and improve. “Innovation’s hard work. It’s based on hundreds of hours of research, of practice. Absent desire, not going to happen.”

Jeff Unruh, the teacher I mentioned previously, significantly changed his practice in a short time because he was a beneficiary of all three of these things.

1. He connected with other educators not only in his school and district, but also through social media (the crowd).
2. Their ideas were shared openly (the visibility) and he was able to disseminate what would work best for the community he served.
3. Ultimately, his want (the desire) to become better fueled his classroom to become the innovative environment that our students need. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Nothing great has ever been achieved without enthusiasm.” Jeff exemplifies that in spades.

Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown explain in their book, [Multipliers](#):

“It isn’t how much you know that matters. What matters is how much access you have to what other people know. It isn’t just how intelligent your team members are; it is how much of that intelligence you can draw out and put to use.”

So, whether it is developing better dancers, creating or remixing music, or designing a better classroom experience, the more open we are, the more likely something amazing will come out of it. Innovation expert Stephen Johnson says, “We can think more creatively if we open our minds to the many connected environments that make creativity possible.” As educational leaders, we must promote and capitalize on open, connected learning.

ABOUT ME



I am the Division Principal for Parkland School Division and an Innovative Teaching, Learning, and Leadership consultant. I believe we need to inspire our kids to follow their passions, while letting them inspire us to do the same.

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