Kirsten Stewart:

In a crisis like a pandemic, it can feel like time is coming to a standstill. We feel stuck in the moment, unable to see clear of the have-to-do's so we can set aside time for some want-to-do's. But the pandemic has also forced us to be more creative with our time as we found ways to make the most of stay at home orders, or adjust to remote working and learning. We've had to re-examine how we use the time we have. Find ways to bend time to our new reality. Some of the teaching methods adopted during the pandemic, for example, we're all about the more effective use of time: methods like personalized learning, station rotations, or the flipped classroom where students do their assigned reading and work before coming to class so that teachers can devote class time to helping students with tougher tasks or augmenting the assignment with an aspirational classroom discussion. These strategies are all about freeing up teacher time so that when they are with their students, they can focus on their students.

Kirsten Stewart:

Now that we are beginning to see clear of the pandemic, the question facing public education systems is which of those strategies should be continued? How can we take advantage of all we've learned? Moving forward, what does innovation in the classroom look like, and how can we find the time for it? How can we find the time for change? We recently posed these questions to Eric Sheninger, an expert in transforming schools to empower learning. Prior to his current role as an associate partner with the International Center for Leadership and Education, Sheninger was an award-winning principal at New Milford High School in Connecticut. Under his leadership, his school became a globally recognized model for putting innovations into practice that changed the culture of the school and boosted student learning.

Kirsten Stewart:

Now a highly sought after speaker Eric recently met with Canyons District principals to talk about the prospects of personalized education. There are examples of this type of instruction throughout the District, including the new Canyons Online, a program for self-driven learners in grades three through 12, who for health, family, or personal reasons seek an educational experience away from the traditional brick and mortar classroom. Canyons Online allows students to work and learn in their own space and at their own pace. It's something the District has committed time to building because it's something we feel has value for students, and as Sheninger points out during our interview, "If you value something, it will get done. We make time for what's important. We make time for change."

Kirsten Stewart:

All right, welcome back. Connect Canyons listeners. We have a very special guest with us today. Eric Sheninger, am I pronouncing that correctly?

Eric Sheninger:

You are.

Kirsten Stewart:

(laughs) Okay. Uh, Eric is an associate partner with the International Center for Leadership and Education, formerly a teacher and a school administrator. Mr. Sheninger is now an author, thought leader, and highly sought after speaker whose work focuses on leading and learning in the digital age. We are lucky to have him lead a workshop here today at Canyons School District with our principals, assistant principals, and District administrators. If you work in education, you know his work. You know he needs no introduction. So without further ado, let me welcome him to Connect Canyons. Eric, thank you for joining us.

Eric Sheninger:

Oh, it's my pleasure to be here.

Kirsten Stewart:

So it's been said that in public education, sometimes we fall into that trap of doing things the way we've always done them. The pandemic has certainly challenged that, you know. In a space of a few months, teachers really had to learn to pivot to new modes of instruction fairly quickly. So, you work with school systems around the world, really. What kinds of innovation are you seeing coming out of the pandemic and what are the kind of the big questions school systems are wrestling with right now?

Eric Sheninger:

Yeah, I mean, I really think that as bad as the pandemic has been, it's been a renaissance of sorts where, you know, people were forced, compelled, motivated to really take that critical lens to their practice and evolve, change for betterment of students. And what I really think that when it's all said and done, the practices that I've been the most impressed with is just the purposeful use of technology. I mean, I think it's always been a pain point for many schools and districts that had the technology, but, you know, really leveraging it for, you know, the learning management system to create an equitable experience for kids. You know, identifying one or two tools to compliment or enhance instruction, but then also use that as a sort of a foundation for more personalized pathways.

Eric Sheninger:

And, you know, I really think that looking at time and how time is used, teachers now have gotten more creative. But they've also built a lot of confidence that they see that, “You know what? This is not as hard as I thought it was going to be. It's not as much work. I'm able to work smarter, not harder, and get better results.

Kirsten Stewart:

I'm curious then how, you know, we're sort of at this point in the change curve, how can we kind of sustain then what we've learned from the pandemic or how can we keep that momentum going?

Eric Sheninger:

Yeah, I mean, sustaining the momentum is really about, you know, keeping the foot on the gas. And you can look at a whole bunch of different options, but you know, one consistent area is to keep eliciting feedback. You know, if you're a teacher get feedback from your colleagues, share your work. Administrators, you know, putting those exemplars front and center at faculty meetings and emails in any type of communications with the community. You know, looking at the different structures and supports for, you know, ongoing job embedded professional learning that really takes what was accomplished to the next level. You know, if we sort of look away from that aspect of supporting our teachers and administrators, then some [of them]will sort of go back to the way it's always been done.

Eric Sheninger:

And then just looking at again, that the way we communicate it, the way we harness our public relations, you know, using a podcast like this to really identify and build those people up. But, you know, we all know if we don't use it, we lose it, and what's not inspected doesn't get done. So I think again, to summarize that consistent focus to keep it front and center. You know, looking at personalization as the umbrella to really support students better than we might have.

Kirsten Stewart:

You talked today too about how leaders can model what we're expecting, right, from teachers and school staff. One of the things with change, change is never easy as a school leader how do you avoid the trap of change fatigue?

Eric Sheninger:

Yeah, and I think, you know, we all just grow tired of the latest fads or the trends. And I think change fatigue is where we're throwing as many things as we can up against the wall and say, "Hey, let's see what sticks." Or the flavor of the month. Or we bring it up, we talk about it the beginning of the year and then there's no follow-up, there's no follow through. So I think that, you know, what it really comes down to is when we look at the three core aspects of what we all do: teaching, learning, and leadership. And leadership…classroom leadership, school leadership, you know. Leadership is not about power, position or title. Leadership is about action.

Eric Sheninger:

But fundamentally what our learners want is what adults want. How will this improve what I do? How will it make me better? How will it lead to better outcomes? How will it not be a time sap? So change fatigue is when there is no clear direction, no clear vision, no support, no feedback, and no real connection to the research or evidence that leads to efficacy. So I think when it's all said and done, we avoid change fatigue when we keep it as simple as possible. When we try to do one thing extremely well, as opposed to [doing] a myriad of initiatives sort of just okay. But I guess the proof is in the pudding. We avoid change fatigue when we're actually able to see how the effort, the time, the support has led or leads to improved outcomes for our kids.

Kirsten Stewart:

Another obstacle to change often is time. Right? And I think you mentioned that. There's only so much time in a day or school year. Teachers already have a lot of to-do's. How do we create space and time for the want-to-do's? You know, to experiment and find new ways to engage students and improve learning outcomes.

Eric Sheninger:

Yeah. We look at time. Everyone has the same amount of time in a day. And it's not about finding time. You know? I know that if I try to find the time to work out, then it just mostly doesn't happen. I have to make the time. And that for me, is at 5:00 AM. So I think when we look at our practice, we have to make the time to grow and get better, and that's gonna look different for everybody. I look at it, you know, in a time when we're being pulled in so many different directions. You know, the use of a personal learning network. You know, making the time to spend 10, 15, 20 minutes on social media, maybe just a couple of times a week, to see what other teachers and other leaders are doing, so we're not reinventing the wheel.

Eric Sheninger:

You know, the greatest inspiration I get is when I see an idea or strategy being implemented into practice, and then I use social media to share it and I hope people will read it. But also I think we have to look at things in terms of how can we reallocate our time so that it frees it up so that we can support more teachers in the classroom? That's when we look at personalization and moving to models, like station rotation, choice activities, playlists, or the flipped classroom. All of those are about freeing up teacher time when they're with the kids to focus on supporting those kids who need the most while also allowing learners that already get it to follow their own path.

Eric Sheninger:

So, I think what it all comes down to is value. If you value something, it will get done. And, you know, when we think about just time, you know, as one of the number one excuses. Here's the bottom line, if it's important to you, you'll find a way. If not, you'll make an excuse. And we often use time as that number one excuse, but I think it really comes down to how we use it. I always look at it in terms of how does the time, the strategy, the investment, how is that leading to evidence of improved learning for our kids? And I think that's a really, really good way to look at it. How does it result in an observable change to our practice if you're a teacher or administrator? So I think it's all about trying to identify, you know, the actions that we take.

Eric Sheninger:

I remember, you know, when I started doing a lot of things I did as a principal, I wasn't told to do it. I did it because I started to see the value in it. And I haven't looked back since. And all the different schools, districts, and organizations that I've worked with in this country and around the world, that's the common denominator: We don't change if we're forced to or told to. We change when we see the value in it for what it's going to do for us at the individual and the collective level. So I think it's all about finding that value and the key is not buy-in. If you have to keep selling a better way to do things…think about the work of Dan Pink in Drive: carrots and sticks, if…then rewards. Extrinsic. Buy-in is extrinsic. But intrinsic is that true desire where we are empowered to do something because we see the value. So I focus more on trying to help people empower those that they work with when it comes to change.

Kirsten Stewart:

You also talked about personalized learning, right, and how the fundamentals of personalized learning are really nothing new. The foundations of great teaching aren't very new. But personalized learning is something that has kind of come to the fore with the pandemic. It's kind of reinforced the importance of it. So talk to me about how you're defining it right now or how you're seeing it?

Eric Sheninger:

Yeah. You know, personalization really is about moving away from all kids doing the same thing, the same way, at the same time, to all learners getting what they need when and where they need it. It's about how we use time. It's about leveraging digital tools to get good data so we can make informed decisions while with our kids. It's about letting them choose whether it's an activity or their own path. It's about amplifying their voice and getting them all involved. Uh, you know, when we look at the core word ‘personal’, you know, I mean, that's what it comes down to. Personal is meaning relevance, value, authenticity. All those elements are a fundamental shift from what, what we teach, what's in the curriculum, what's on the test to who, which emphasizes ownership.

Eric Sheninger:

And I think that comes back to when we talk... We're talking about time, we're talking about motivation, we're talking about change. Most people don't change because it's not personal to them. They don't see that value. There's that lack of clarity for results. Personalization is about creating those conditions where, again, people can go at their own pace, but they understand that ultimately the goal is improvement and growth. So I think the definition can vary. And I'm not one to put a specific definition of personalization, but it really comes down to creating an equitable experience for all kids.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. So this is kind of a big question, but what are some of the first steps that school leaders take to embed personalized learning in our classrooms?

Eric Sheninger:

The first step, I think that leaders have to have clarity. And where I see a lot of challenges is there's a lack of clarity in the ‘why.’ Why should we focus on implementing a personalized learning culture? And then how. There has to be clarity in how do we do it? How do we provide feedback to our teachers? Uh, how do we identify those key elements? Then finally is the ‘what.’ What evidence can we use both qualitative and quantitative that illustrates that this move to personalization has led to improved outcomes for our kids? And I think the leader's role is critical because if teachers understand that the leader doesn't believe in it or doesn't understand it, it's hard to move them. And some people will not change if they know that that accountability for growth is not there.

Eric Sheninger:

And, you know, when it's all said and done, the results are from the actions of our teachers, the ones who are doing the work, implementing it with fidelity. But the leaders have to give them permission, they have to grant autonomy. They have to understand what those elements are so that they can coach their teachers up or work with the feedback that instructional coaches are implementing so that everyone is focused on that same goal. Because when you walk into any elementary school, middle school, high school in your district, there should be that embracement of common vision, common language, common expectations. And I think that's the key role of a leader is to not tell people what to do, but take them where they need to be.

Kirsten Stewart:

You've spoken a lot about technology. You know, the use of technology in classrooms has obviously been a focus for schools during the pandemic, but you've also talked about how we need to resist the temptation to think technology is the solution. So explain to me what you mean by the purposeful integration of technology.

Eric Sheninger:

Yeah, I mean, purposeful use is how do we move away from substitution, surface level, where there's no functional change or improvement? You know, technology will not improve every lesson. It will not improve every outcome. It won't improve every project. And some kids don't want to use technology. Some are not successful just like adults. So, you know, purposeful is how does the use in the context of a student represent a fundamental improvement, in terms of what they've done without it? How can they use it in ways to support and enhance their learning? And I think with the pandemic, we saw on one side too much use of technology. Prior to the pandemic, in some cases we saw not enough. So I think the key is that balance.

Eric Sheninger:

So purposeful is any type of use by the student. That's the key. It's not what the adult does with technology that matters, it's how does the student use it to learn in ways they couldn't without it. But from a teacher perspective or leader perspective, the key is how does it represent a fundamental improvement in terms of teaching or leadership, as opposed to what they've done traditionally. So purposeful comes back to the learning outcome, learning target, the standards, and the competencies they want our kids to develop.

Kirsten Stewart:

Well, I think that's all I got today. Any parting words you'd like to leave us with?

Eric Sheninger:

Oh, parting words. I guess I'd like to plug my new book.

Kirsten Stewart:

Oh, absolutely yeah.

Eric Sheninger:

So, my pandemic project was writing a book.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay.

Eric Sheninger:

And, it's called Disruptive Thinking in Our Classrooms: Preparing Learners for Their Future. I'm really, really excited because this is a book that I wrote for teachers. Now leaders can benefit, but chapter five is all about personalization. But I think that the part that I like the most about it is the inspiration, the content, the ideas came from all of the districts that I've been honored to work with.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay, so some very concrete, tangible...

Eric Sheninger:

Concrete ideas, and two of those districts happened to be from your state of Utah: Davis School District and the Juab School District. But I also did something that I have not seen in other books. I created an online resource that archives, curates all different examples of evidence-

Kirsten Stewart:

Oh, great.

Eric Sheninger:

-so that when teachers read a strategy in the book, they can go to this Google Doc and see what it actually looks like. So I'm really, really excited and it's available on Amazon.

Kirsten Stewart:

Well, wonderful. Okay. Well, definitely, that's a great plug and I think important for teachers to hear. We can talk about leadership, but there's leadership in the classroom every day and that's, as you mentioned, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak.

Eric Sheninger:

Exactly.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. Well again, thank you for taking time. I know you're very busy and we appreciate you being here today.

Eric Sheninger:

My pleasure.

Kirsten Stewart:

You've been listening to Connect Canyons. This episode was reported by Kirsten Stewart and edited and produced by Stephanie Christensen. Tune in next week, and if you like our storytelling, be sure to encourage a friend to subscribe.