Details

How to Embrace Student-Centered Learning this Year - Bonus Episode with SchoolStack
In this episode, Sarah and Hal Schwartz, the team behind SchoolStack, discuss student-centered learning and how to empower students with voice and choice this school year. You'll hear classroom stories and strategies to help you embrace student-centered learning and save time with your instructional design.

Show notes: https://classtechtips.com/2022/01/09/student-centered-learning-bonus/

Introduction

Hello there and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast! If we haven't met before, my name is Monica Burns. I'm a former NYC public school teacher and I've been out of the classroom for a few years leading professional development for educators, and writing about all things EdTech on my blog ClassTechTips.com

This year we're celebrating the 10th anniversary of the blog and there are a lot of exciting things in the works! From new music here on the podcast, to a new look on the website – I can't wait to share everything with you.

You might be used to joining me on Tuesdays for new episodes of the podcast, and today is a special bonus episode in partnership with SchoolStack, I'm excited to bring you another special bonus episode on a Sunday.

Before we jump into today's episode, a quick reminder — you can head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode, and if you're listening to this episode on a podcast player like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Google Podcasts, you should see a link in the description that you can click on as you listen today and it will take you to all of the resources I mention.

Promotion/Reminder

This episode is sponsored by SchoolStack, a tool that guides teachers in designing and delivering lessons that focus on learner variability, agency, and choice. With SchoolStack, educators save time, move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to education, and empower students. They're on a mission to help educators bring student-centered learning to all schools! Go to www.myschoolstack.com to learn more and see details about the FREE pilot program running through the end of the school year!

Today's Intro

Today's episode is titled *How to Embrace Student-Centered Learning this Year* and I chat with Sarah Schwartz and Hal Schwartz all about student-centered learning and Instructional Design in today's episode. I know that you'll learn so much from these two passionate educators who share stories, ideas, and insights into the power of EdTech.

Episode Transcript

Monica:

Welcome to the podcast today. I am so excited to have you both on to talk about a few different things underneath the umbrella of Ed Tech and education. Can you share a little bit about your roles and your background in this space to get us started?

Sarah Schwartz:

Sure. Yeah, we are so excited to be chatting with you today. I'm Sarah Schwartz and I'm Hal Schwartz and we're actually both former educators. And we recently co-founded an EdTech company called SchoolStack. So I'm a former high school English teacher. I actually got to start my teaching career at a project based learning in Sweden, which was really amazing because I got to see students who were so engaged. They were really independent, they were motivated and best of all, they just loved school. So right off the bat, I really became sort of hooked on that student centered, , learning model. And when I came back home, I was fortunate to find another project based learning school to, teach at in North Carolina.

Hal Schwartz:

Yeah. And I started my educational journey, as an elementary school teacher teaching third and fourth grade. , I've had the opportunity to work in some really unique and amazing schools across the country. , you know, what's wild is a student that I taught in my first year at teaching recently asked me to walk her down the aisle at her wedding this summer, , which is incredible. It also makes me feel a little old <laugh> I, I spent a few years as a director of curriculum and instruction, before becoming an elementary school principal several years ago. And, now, as Sarah said, you know, we've shifted to focusing on SchoolStack full time, which has been really fun.

Monica:

That's wonderful. And just, for both of you to have such a variety of experiences in different school settings, different parts of this country and other countries, I don't know if you all, get my email that I send out, but I sent out kind of a silly email at the end of 2021 of about, Waterloo by Abba being my top Spotify song, which I was, oh, thanks. <laugh> I'm like, I don't know how that came across. , but it just made me smile as you're talking about your, your experience at a project based learning school, in Sweden. And you know, as we're talking today about these different types of models of education and different learning experiences and, you know, exploring this topic of student centered learning, can you help unpack this term if it's not a term, everyone, all the listeners use every day or they've heard about it before, but just that student centered learning, can you help unpack that term for us?

Sarah Schwartz:

Sure. Yeah, definitely. So student centered learning is really how it's, it's the teacher putting the student at the center when they're planning, when they're teaching and when they're assessing. So we know that all children are unique and so a one size fits all approach to education just doesn't work as well. So one where traditionally the teacher lectures on a topic and then the students, take a test to see if they've learned that topic where, where students that are learning really shifts away from that, and this requires collaboration. And it means that students have a voice and why, what and how their learning experiences take shape.

Monica:

That's wonderful. When you think about what the primary focus is or what your priorities should be, you know, in a classroom environment, just that idea of planning, right. Coming in with a strategy right around that particular piece, as opposed to kind of waiting to the end or, or noticing when it might feel like it's too late or it's time to move on. So if someone walks into a classroom, how do they know that student centered learning is happening? What are the kind of things they should see in action?

Hal Schwartz:

Yeah, that, I mean, that's a great question. And I think you're right. Being able to kind of witness it and see it in real time, rather than waiting until you get to the end. , you know, in this type of environment, the teacher shares control of the classroom. So, you know, the students are allowed to explore, they're allowed to experiment, they're allowed to discover on their own. , I think sometimes people confuse, confuse it with students just being given run

of the place mm-hmm <affirmative>. But, you, you know, what it, what it really means is that they have some influence in the decisions being made. So as an observer, there, there really be a number of different look for, you know, for example, is there plenty of space and opportunity for students to ask questions and, you know, are teachers helping guide students toward the resources, , toward the materials that, that can help them find the answers to those questions rather than simply telling them the answer mm-hmm <affirmative> , do students have choice?

Hal Schwartz:

Do they have voice in their learning? In, in other words, do they feel, do students feel like they're, co-creators in their educational experience? , another thing that I would want to look for would be the relevance in kinda real world application of the content and curriculum the students are engaged in, you know, is there a meaningful connection to students lives in the work that they're being asked to do? , you know, these components, I think, are really at the core of what Sarah mentioned earlier, which is that collaboration and the why, , the what and the, how they're learning

Monica:

Mm-hmm <affirmative> so that co-learning piece and, and really anchoring what students are doing in authentic experiences. Sounds like a really crucial component of all of this. Do you have any examples of, of things that could help listeners wrap their head around this idea of kinda real world connections or just that kind of student voice piece that might come into play?

Sarah Schwartz:

Yeah, so teachers could take any standard or goal that they're working on with students. So we kind of just made some example lessons around, , studying about the three branches of government, , because that's typically in social studies classrooms across the country. , and so a teacher could say like, if my goal is to get students to really understand these topics, what are flexible ways I can be flexible to help them get to this goal. So we just designed some assessments for a model, for a unit that was around and it could, we could say, you know, can students create a podcast as one choice, or if that's not something that feels right for them, could they create a slideshow that they would could show to another class to teach them about, , these topics? Or could they write a children's book about the topics mm-hmm <affirmative>. So that's just one example of ways where you could take that goal, that we all

have those same firm goals, but are there flexible ways that we can, , get students to reach them and, and measure if they're learning them?

Hal Schwartz:

Yeah. I think, I think that hit on the demonstration piece too, but also in how they're accessing it. So, you know, are we looking at primary sources, , are students given the opportunity to listen to historical or, you know, do some, do some interviewing of, of current people, whether it's, , you know, local representatives or even reaching out to some of their, , state representatives to actually interview them? , there's so many ways to access that information, , that, that maybe doesn't appeal to one person, but that's someone else's gen am. So how do we, how do we find a way to kind of support those interactions as well?

Monica:

And I would imagine, you know, as you're talking about helping students as consumers, right. Consuming some of that content and then as creators, right. Making some pieces that go along with their learning technology or tech tools or digital devices, or kind of all the, we might use to describe it must play, you know, a pretty significant role or a special role, at least in student-centered learning. Have, is that something that you've seen?

Hal Schwartz:

Yeah, I, I mean, totally, technology. It is a great tool to help support teachers and students. And I think, especially when it comes to that student-centered learning piece, you know, we've been a, is to see how teachers have worked so hard. I think, especially in these past few years, to use technology in meaningful ways in their classrooms. And, and I mean, especially over the past few years, it's really been trial by fire. , and we just give so much credit to teachers for going with it and finding ways to make it work in their classrooms. , you know, so for student-centered learning, I think teachers can really use technology to create lessons that can be used asynchronously just as, as one example, you know, that frees them up to work with individuals in small groups of students in the classroom. , and, and I, I think having these asynchronous lessons, one of the other benefits is it allows students to be able to access that information where and when they need it.

Hal Schwartz:

, you know, so they can work at their own own pace or go back and review it when they need to, hey can work outside of, of the school building. I think some of these technologies have

really helped to kind of trans transcend the physical space, , and, and make learning happen anytime, anywhere. , I think the other big piece is technology can really help teachers more easily personalize and differentiate learning for students. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And again, there are so many, you know, great, great resources and tools out there. I guess the, the simple answer to your question is, yeah, technology can play a huge role in supporting student-centered learning.

Monica:

Yeah. And such great examples that you shared, whether someone's coming into today's episode with a commitment to differentiate instruction or building in an asynchronous or self-paced model into the work that they do. So they can give some more of that one on one or small group support. It sounds like there's just a lot of connections between <affirmative> a tech and student center learning, which, you know, kind of brings me into this next question I wanted to ask you all about. And, you know, we mentioned kind of getting started around the planning and that has to go in to these types of experiences. And listeners are probably familiar with the term instructional design, right. As they craft lessons for their students, or they support classroom educators as they're creating learning experiences for their students. So what exactly is an instructional design system? How could, , how would we look at that? Or how might that be a bit different?

Sarah Schwartz:

Yeah. So that's a great question. , and I recently read a book by George Couros and Katie Novak called *Innovate Inside the Box* I took a course with them recently, and so we read that book, , which was awesome. And they talk about in there that curriculum tells us what to teach, but not how to teach it so that how to teach it part is really instructional design. And it's so important. There's just so much research out there about best practices for teachers, but especially with all that they have on their plates right now, like they really deserve and need more support in taking those best practices and putting them into action. So that's what instructional design systems can do. They can help with that piece of how do we teach this curriculum in ways that are best for our students.

Monica:

Yeah. And, you know, as we were talking about the technology connection piece to what student experiences might look like, I would imagine that Ed Tech, you know, plays a role with the educator side of things when it comes to, to this too. So, you know, how can EdTech help an educator or school or a district really embrace this idea of an instructional design system?

Hal Schwartz:

Yeah. So I mean, this, this question hits close to home. , you know, when I, when I worked in schools, both as a director of curriculum and instruction, and, and then as a principal, I had access to some really great technology tools to support each and students. You know, we had, , learning and data management systems. We had tools that helped supplement, , instruction and curriculum like reading and math programs. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. , but I worked at a progressive school that really prioritized student voice and choice. And I, I often looked for more technology tools, that would actually help our teachers design this type of instruction. So, you know, through my own experience, reflecting on the things that worked and, and also some, some that didn't, I think I see a few ways that educational technology can, can work to support educators, in embracing instructional design.

Hal Schwartz:

Mm-hmm <affirmative> the, the first thing is that Ed Tech companies have to consider the way we're onboarding, the way that we're training and continually developing teachers and schools in using our products. , just like with students, you know, we've hit on this a couple times. Mm-hmm <affirmative> teachers need to see the direct application between the Ed Tech being offered in kind of its tangible uses in their, in their own classroom. , in other words, like how can they start using the tool in designing and delivering lessons in their classrooms tomorrow? you know, it's going to be, it's going to be a key question. And I think also, you know, we need to continue to push this conversation around interoperability, you know, so how can we help school leaders and educators, who want to view data from multiple tools to see it all in one place. And, and I think, you know, a lot of other industries do this really well. There's healthcare, there's online banking, cash, and payments app, payment apps. They all make it really easy to exchange data between different applications and technologies. , and if teachers, schools and districts are going to kind of openly embrace instructional design systems, you know, we have to continue to so support the ways in, in which all of our systems, whether it's student information, learning management, instructional design, the way that they communicate with and, and across each other.

Monica:

Yeah. Well, you know, as you're talking there, I'm just, I'm kinda picturing right. That data dashboard, if you will, right? Yeah. Or, or having all of those components as an easily accessible for all stakeholders of a, you know, of a school or a district. And, you know, that seems like an important role that technology plays to, to make that happen. And, you know,

as we're thinking about specific reasons why having an instructional design system is really a must have, I would imagine, you know, data organization is on that list. The ability to access data easily is on that list. Are there other reasons why an instructional design system is a, is a must have,

Sarah Schwartz:

Yeah. You hit on some really important ones, that are key for sure. , data definitely plays into that and yeah, there are definitely, , other reasons. So I'll be honest, like about my own teaching experience. , when I first became a teacher, I really struggled a lot, as I mentioned before, you know, I was in project based learning schools and I loved them. I loved the idea of them, but then in reality, I often had a hard time taking all of the ideas in my head for lessons and units and projects, and then bringing them to life for my students, like in an organized, succinct way. So just of course, like with everything else that you juggle as a teacher, like I was, you know, grading, building relationships, connecting with parents and caregivers at home. I just felt like I didn't have the time or the tools to really wrap my head around how to implement my ideas.

Sarah Schwartz:

So I personally like really would've benefited from an instructional design system and, and that was all pre COVID. So I can't even imagine how much more challenging things is things are for teachers like right now. , so many are in survival mode. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. So again, we just really need to be offering them as much support as possible because even with all that's going on right now, like for our students' sake, we can't lose sight of our bigger goals of why we're doing this work in the first place, why we became educators. , you know, in the midst of COVID, there's been lots of talk about not going back to the way things were mm-hmm <affirmative>. And again, just with everything that schools are dealing with right now, we need to support them in like more of that, how to make those changes. So that's what instructional design systems can really help with. They can help us take those lofty goals of providing research based student-centered innovative and equitable learning and give us more of like a roadmap and a framework to get there. , they can also make learning really accessible to be learning any time anywhere. , and it helps teachers to sort of level the playing field for students, because it can give a system for teachers across classrooms and grades, a similar framework framework that they're all using to provide instruction for students.

Monica:

And I really like that idea of almost like a community around it. Right. Everyone can have conversations around this system. And it's so funny because you know, the episode, that goes along, I guess, kind of the, not even a week right before this one goes live. So just a couple days before this one pops up live, it'll be in everyone's feed is all around my one word for the year, which I don't always do, but I thought for 2022, you know, the word optimize really stuck out for me. And one of the things I talked about is just this idea of having a system right, going through, right. Having routines, keeping things organized. And, you know, as you're talking about, you know, these instructional design systems really comes back to that same idea of just kind of keeping things in one place. <laugh> having things right. Working, organize, especially right. If you're in an environment where there's a lot of ideas floating around and you want to make sure that it's kind of easy for everyone to, to make sense of that. Not only ourselves <laugh>, but, but students too,

Sarah Schwartz:

Mm-hmm <affirmative> yeah, totally. We actually use this analogy often when we're talking about instructional design systems. Like if you imagine you have, have a closet to organize your clothes, so the clothes are what you're going to organize, but how you're going to organize them is another question. Like, if you don't have a system in your closet, mm-hmm <affirmative>, you could throw all of your clothes in there, but that's not really going to do you much good. That's kind of my system, I guess that's how system. Yeah, mine is. Yeah. It's just better to utilize, like, can you put shelves in there or a bar or drawers. So basically you're giving yourself that system or structure. So then organizing your clothes just gets much simpler and more manageable. So yeah. I love optimize as a word of the, I may have to borrow that I've never done a word of the year either, but I think it's time <laugh>.

Monica:

Yeah. Especially after the past few years where I'm like nothing new. Right. But that idea of just making right. All the things that we know are so important already, like embracing them and right. Having, you know, some great systems that go along with it, which you brings us into, you know, one thing I want to make sure we chat about today while we're all here together, which is SchoolStack. Right. And you spoke at the top of the episode just about your, your shift from a classroom, from school, from district into this work around SchoolStack. So can you tell us a little bit about what it does, how someone could get started using this platform and maybe even how it connects to some of these big ideas we've talked about together today?

Sarah Schwartz:

Sure. Yeah. We, we're really excited to share about SchoolStack with you and your community. So it's a tool that does just what we've been talking about, which is like helping teachers take their curriculums and teach them in a way that really puts the student at the center of their learning. Like it provides that system or that framework for teachers. , so it was really important to us to use research when we designed it. , so we pulled a lot from the universal design for learning framework or UDL, to help us with design. We, so we really focus on things like learner variability and providing students with choice and autonomy. , and we built a tool with lots of flexibility. So it's been really fun to see all of the really creative and different ways that teachers are using it. We like to say it's really unique in three ways, which for the first is the way that teachers create their lessons.

Sarah Schwartz:

The second is the way that they organize their lessons for students mm-hmm <affirmative>. And then the third is how students are interacting with their lessons. So after they create lessons in SchoolStack, they can color code them and actually drag them, drop them onto what we call stacks that are really choice board. So SchoolStacks allows you to make, , choice boards in all sorts of different ways. , and we want us to make it really easily for teachers to personalize and differentiate so they can easily copy lessons and stacks and, , make small changes to them to reach different groups of students. We also really wanted to focus on, you know, saving teachers time and helping them as much as possible when we can. So we have a content library of lessons, love that. , yeah, so they can kind of look through those and they can use them as they are, or they can change them.

Sarah Schwartz:

And they can also really collaborate with their teaching teams and create lessons and, stacks or choice boards together. , so we, any teacher can use SchoolStack for free. , and right now are also running a pilot where you can use the premium version for free. So since we're pretty new to the Ed Tech scene, we just really wanted to focus right now on partnering with teachers and getting feedback so that we continue to build something that's really meaningful and helpful for them. So we would love if anyone listening wants to learn more about the pilot, they can, check that out on our website under there's a, a pilot tab and just, there's also a video on the site that helps kind of give an overview of the tool.

Monica:

That's awesome. And I know that my listeners, both here on the podcast and then readers on the blog too, I love jumping into new tools, love using things that they have quick and free access to that are going to save them time. So that is just so huge. And I will make sure that anyone listening today can just open up the description box right below where they're pressing play on the podcast. And there'll be a link that takes them right out to that so that they can learn a little bit more. But before we officially finish up here, can you just tell us, you know, where can listeners connect with you? Where can they learn more about your work?

Hal Schwartz:

Yeah, thank you for asking, you know, we love connecting with educators. You know, if, if this episode sparked any curiosity or passion, excitement, even questions in anyone listening, you know, we'd love to hear from you. So again, our, our website is www.myschoolstack.com. , you can find all of our social media accounts in the show notes mm-hmm <affirmative>, and, and, you know, anyone can reach out to us. We're always open to, toyou know, hearing from hearing from folks that are doing the work on the ground, , hello@myschoolstack.com. So please feel free to connect with us.

Monica:

Wonderful. Well, I will make sure to put all of that info, so anyone's listening can tap or bookmark or go follow along, , and learn more. So thank you both so much for carving out some time for talking about these topics and for sharing SchoolStack today.

It was so wonderful chatting with Sarah and Hal today, hearing their stories and learning a bit more about SchoolStack. Let's finish up this episode with a few quick tips.

So let's make this EdTech easy…

First, reflect on your commitment to student-centered learning.

Next, examine the role technology plays.

Then, investigate an instructional design system.

Finally, share your ideas with a colleague.

Remember, you can find the shownotes and the full list of resources from this episode on

classtechtips.com/podcast including all of the ways to connect with the team at

SchoolStack.

Promotion/Reminder

A big thank you to our sponsor for this episode, SchoolStack! They're on a mission to help educators bring student-centered learning to all schools by providing a tool that helps teachers focus on learner variability, agency, and choice. If you love choice boards, want to save time, and empower students, you'll love SchoolStack! Check out their website, www.myschoolstack.com to learn more and sign up for FREE!

Outro

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Episode Resources

- Check out the SchoolStack website
- Send Sarah and Hal Schwartz an email
- Follow SchoolStack on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook