



Education Futures

Balancing the Familiar and the Unknown

By Katherine Prince

Fourteen Years of Education Foresight

Fourteen years ago, KnowledgeWorks commissioned a forecast on the future of learning, which resulted in a compelling product that launched the organization onto the national stage. Today, we continue to publish freely available comprehensive forecasts on the future of learning. We also publish deep dives into specific topic areas, strategy guides for shaping the future of learning, and other sensemaking and engagement tools. In addition, we deliver presentations and workshops to help education stakeholders in the USA and abroad explore future possibilities.

To tell the story of how KnowledgeWorks has evolved and grown into its use of Futures Studies is also to tell the story of KnowledgeWorks itself and of my own professional journey in Futures Studies. Across multiple leadership changes and strategy shifts, KnowledgeWorks has come to see the value of a field that we discovered when seeking guidance for ourselves. Initial excitement led the organization to use Futures Studies to provide guidance for others across education. Over the years, we came to realize the full potential of Futures Studies: we now use our forecasts to anchor the organization's strategic direction. New risks are emerging as the work becomes increasingly integrated into the organization, but new opportunities are also manifesting as the work matures.

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KnowledgeWorks Now

KnowledgeWorks is an operating foundation based in Cincinnati, OH, and working across the USA. Our current vision is that every student experiences meaningful personalized learning that enables him or her to thrive in college, career and civic life. Today, we work in four areas as follows: exploring the future of learning; growing educator impact by helping schools and school districts transition to personalized, competency-based learning; partnering with state and federal policymakers to align policy in support of that approach to learning; and creating an evidence base for student-centered learning. Each of these bodies of work supports the others and allows the organization to help co-create the future of learning alongside education stakeholders.

KnowledgeWorks has a team of four people focusing on Futures Studies from different locations around the USA. We extend our capacity by involving consultants in some projects. Every three years, we publish a comprehensive 10-year forecast on the future of learning, which kicks off a new cycle of Futures Studies work. When not producing forecasts and related assets, we help stakeholders make sense of future possibilities and generate strategic insights through presentations, workshops and other forms of engagement. These engagements focus on making sense of future possibilities and helping a wide range of education stakeholders see themselves as active agents of change in shaping the future of learning. Our Futures Studies work concentrates on external forces of change affecting education, given that education stakeholders tend to have a solid understanding of trends and changes within the field.

KnowledgeWorks Then

In 2005, KnowledgeWorks served only Ohio. We aimed to further universal access to high-quality educational opportunities. Our programs focused on supporting high schools in transitioning to small schools and early college high schools, and they also addressed the needs of adult learners and young children. We were a young foundation seeking to inform the next five years of our strategic plan when our founding Chief Executive Officer (CEO) learned of Futures Studies from contacts at Procter & Gamble. Eager to make informed choices, KnowledgeWorks commissioned a forecast on the future of education from the Institute for the Future (ITF) to guide our internal planning.

The 2006 Map: Onto the National Stage

While KnowledgeWorks did use that first forecast, *2006-2016 Map of Future Forces Affecting Education*, to inform its strategic planning, the organization quickly realized that the possibilities and insights it raised had far broader value. At what became an epochal event, KnowledgeWorks gathered a small group of education leaders and influencers from around the USA for an exclusive, in-depth reveal of the forecast. It created a stir. The forecast became a sensation in the world of education reform, with people from a wide variety of organizations expressing excitement about it and inviting KnowledgeWorks staff to present on its insights. As a result of our promotional efforts and word of mouth, the map, as we called it, opened doors for the organization and extended its reach, catapulting KnowledgeWorks onto the national stage.

My first experience with the map was at an all-staff gathering. I had been working for only a few months as a program manager for a now-defunct online learning community for KnowledgeWorks' partner schools, and I had no idea what future studies were. I had heard

of scenario planning when my previous user had commissioned a set of scenarios and had required many staff to participate in conversations about them. That process was not generally well-received; many colleagues did not see how looking to the future would inform their work.

The all-staff presentation on KnowledgeWorks' map of the future plunged me into the realm of future studies. The map highlighted drivers of change that I found frightening and destabilizing. I had no idea what to do with it. When the organization restructured, I had to start using the map in the context of two projects and working more deeply with its content.

One of those projects used the map to frame convenings about possibilities for teaching and professional learning. Leaders came together to imagine scenarios for the future and to identify innovations that could help move toward preferred futures. Insights from the convenings led KnowledgeWorks to acquire another organization to help align our portfolio with emerging needs. The second project, a collaboration with a national organization, used an extended exploration of future possibilities to support state coalitions in identifying ways of improving teaching in their states. My contributions to both projects focused mainly on project management and documentation, not on Futures Studies.

In addition, KnowledgeWorks collaborated with other regional and national education organizations to engage their audiences with the map. We also partnered with an education research lab that had been tracking trends to publish scenarios derived from the forecast. We worked with a digital storytelling organization to publish student-created videos depicting future possibilities. We maintained a separate, interactive website that invited users to share signals of change related to the map, though not many contributed. All these efforts reflected different ways of helping education stakeholders engage with future possibilities and develop insights that could help reform the system. They were expensive, but KnowledgeWorks wanted to make an investment and an impact.

During this phase, the organization was excited to have such a valuable tool. We used the map broadly. We used it strategically and explored a range of ways of bringing its insights to different audiences, but we did not really know what we had. We saw the map as a thing – a great thing, but a thing. We did not yet fully appreciate the field of Futures Studies in which it was situated.

The 2020 Forecast: A World of Learning

Wanting more, KnowledgeWorks (2009) commissioned its second map of the future, *2020 Forecast: Creating the Future of Learning*. Published in spring 2009, it emphasized the increasingly widespread options for individuals and organizations to create their own futures. Colleagues who had been presenting on the 2006 map continued to travel widely sharing about the 2020 forecast. KnowledgeWorks also kept two consultants on contract to extend our presentation capacity. Presentations focused heavily on the drivers of change, along with signals of change illustrating how those drivers were beginning to impact education.

Because the forecast was a hot item, there was a lot of internal debate about who got to do what with it and under what team it would be housed. These growing pains reflected both KnowledgeWorks' shifting organizational focus and structure and its developing understanding of Futures Studies. They took place in the context of great recession when two difficult rounds of layoffs occurred. Not having been part of the team that had been leading the 2020 forecast's

creation, I was called in to manage its production and release as staffing shifted. This assignment required me to get involved with considering how to depict ideas about the future in a visually accessible form and how to help audiences connect with future possibilities, even though I myself did not yet deeply understand what it meant to think about the future. My involvement was projected to be 20 percent time but quickly grew to 50 percent and stayed there for five years and across several different team configurations.

Even with the strain of reduced resources, KnowledgeWorks remained excited about Futures Studies. This excitement fueled a deepening of the work. My team started facilitating strategic learning experiences that went beyond an introductory presentation. These experiences aimed to support participants in applying insights from the forecast to specific contexts and in using the experience of learning about the future to inform strategic decisions. I had to learn to deliver external presentations, a process that took me years to develop comfort with. I did that by watching others and by drawing upon earlier experiences in other contexts.

While KnowledgeWorks averaged high marks on surveys evaluating the strategic learning experiences that we delivered, we came to understand how much easier it was to engage audiences with the future when individuals had a choice about whether to attend an event. We also gained perspective on applying Futures Studies to education: because stakeholders generally lack familiarity with Futures Studies, KnowledgeWorks' introduction of new material and ways of thinking can have less context than a Futures Studies engagement would have in an internal or consulting context. Taking into account such considerations, we developed increasing skills in helping people find ways into exploring the future of learning. However, we did not always manage it: sometimes, the future seemed too far away to be useful. One memorable comment from a questionnaire described an experience that a colleague and I facilitated as having been like stepping into a bad science fiction novel.

KnowledgeWorks started charging fees for some strategic learning experiences, with modest annual revenue goals. We also continued to expand and deepen our Futures Studies partnerships. Among them, we had the opportunity to collaborate with a social innovation practice that had experience in Futures Studies to create two gatherings for grantmakers. Those events asked participants to walk in the shoes of personas to explore what different scenarios could mean for learners. This collaboration expanded KnowledgeWorks' experience in working with a range of foresight tools.

Because the Futures Studies work had an identity that was different from KnowledgeWorks', we continued to maintain a separate website for it and to share content on the new social media platforms with #FutureEd. With the goals of maximizing reach, deepening engagement and reinforcing credibility, we started publishing new kinds of pieces related to the forecast. Those pieces included policy briefs, written and video personas illustrating what future educator roles might look like, a toolkit that seeks to help individuals and organizations design their own explorations of the future, short publications highlighting new models of learning, and a blog.¹ Early blog posts tended to emphasize how ongoing developments or signals of change related to the drivers of change we had identified. Audiences occupied with the daily business of running education systems or working to improve them needed evidence of how the changes described in our forecasts were beginning to play out. As we produced these resources, we did not know what would gain traction, but we valued creativity and aimed to leave no budgeted dollar unspent.

Two years after the release of the 2020 forecast, KnowledgeWorks published an update to freshen up its ideas without introducing new drivers of change. We had learned that education stakeholders tended to need time to make sense of the concepts that a forecast presented. That update represented a significant departure for KnowledgeWorks: for the first time, we took a stance on what we wanted for the future of learning. We called for a world of learning that was amplified, authentic, connected, customized, relevant and resilient; then we provided guidance on ways of taking action to bring to that vision to life. It felt bold to take a stance on where we wanted to learn to go instead of being a neutral purveyor of possibilities. Our vision and mission were not yet focused on personalized, competency-based learning. Taking this stance influenced KnowledgeWorks' thinking about its broader work. It also led to an integration of the Futures Studies blog with KnowledgeWorks' main blog under a new name, "World of Learning."

Throughout this period, which spanned 2008 through 2011, KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies practice and publications were growing and deepening, and the organization was developing more capacity related to Futures Studies. KnowledgeWorks' understanding of Futures Studies as a strategic tool had deepened. So too had our understanding of what it took to help different audiences apply it. However, we still situated the work more in the context of organizational learning and development than Futures Studies. We were well on our way past product and into the process but had not yet secured a lasting understanding of its value within the organization.

Recombinant Education: Radically Personalized Learning

Creating a third forecast was by no means a given. To inform the decision, KnowledgeWorks compiled evidence of the impact of our Futures Studies work, interviewing former partners and clients to make a case that went beyond easily accessible metrics such as the number of publications distributed, number of engagements conducted and number of publications citing our work. The resulting whitepaper described the ways in which our Futures Studies work had broadened KnowledgeWorks' presence in the field of education while also deepening our impact.

It found that the Futures Studies work had:

- Built KnowledgeWorks' visibility and credibility, cementing the organization's role as a national thought leader;
- Challenged the educational status quo by removing barriers within leading organizations with which we had worked;
- Led the field by framing the conversation about the future;
- Strengthened and built relationships for other areas of our work; and
- Established a credible and coherent messaging platform for KnowledgeWorks.

The whitepaper concluded that creating another forecast would ensure KnowledgeWorks' position as "a key architect of the new education landscape."² KnowledgeWorks contracted with the futurist who had led the writing of our first two forecasts when she was at IFTF to complete our third comprehensive forecast. For the first time, I was involved in the idea formulation and developmental editing. Still, neither I nor anyone else on staff had any formal training in [Futures Studies](#). We had been learning by doing and from partners and had been weaving in other competencies in areas such as organizational learning and creative problem solving. By this time, I felt comfortable working with Futures Studies products, but writing a forecast felt like a black box to me. Working so closely on this newest forecast began to demystify the process.

Recombinant Education: Regenerating the Learning Ecosystem was published in fall 2012. It highlighted the uncoupling of teaching and learning from traditional education institutions as a result of digital disintermediation. In addition, it called for readers to be active agents of change in harnessing disruptive forces of change to create new approaches that could enable rich personalization for every learner throughout a lifetime.

A few days after that forecast launched, another shift in staffing led to my becoming the de facto leader of KnowledgeWorks' futures studies work. My Futures Studies' job responsibilities still represented only half of my overall work. Though two other people were supporting KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies activities, I was the only one who presented publicly on our forecasts. Furthermore, I had to learn to lead the work with reduced team size and reduced budget. While that meant learning new skills and navigating new responsibilities, I felt freedom in finding my voice in presenting about future possibilities, instead of comparing my approach to others. Stepping into my own authority represented part of taking ownership of Futures Studies at KnowledgeWorks. I found it much easier to present on a forecast having contributed to its development, either to its production or use.

In my external engagements, I increasingly focused on helping people identify their preferred futures of learning and consider how they might move toward them. That sense of creating what we want for the future had always been part of what had attracted me to Futures Studies, and it seemed to resonate with clients, too. I came to see myself as an interpreter who bridged present and future and education and external environments. I did not know Futures Studies as deeply as many, but I devoted time to studying my audiences and to finding connection points between their current realities and future possibilities. In addition, I led the creation of an infographic highlighting the forecast's big story, as I had been inspired by some more visually oriented forecasts and wanted to explore a more schematic representation of future possibilities.

In the meantime, organizational changes and shifting priorities had cut our Futures Studies work nearly to the bone. In 2013, an interim CEO enabled me to focus on foresight full time, while at the same time laying off or reassigning the team's other members. He conveyed that he did not see the value of Futures Studies but that he would let the work continue for the next CEO to assess. When I had the chance to identify a new focal point in my title, I replaced "organizational development and foresight" with "strategic foresight."

This low point for the work turned out to be a coalescing moment for me. Freed to focus on Futures Studies full time, I found that I had the headspace to go deeper with the work and to develop more like a futurist. I sought training, earning a professional certificate in foresight from the University of Houston and completing IFTF's foresight practitioner training. I finally obtained more context about the field in which my practice had been partially situated for six years. Taking this time to develop my own studies and training helped prepare me for reestablishing future studies as a key focus for KnowledgeWorks.

Though the initial excitement around KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies works had waned, a subset of colleagues had come to see the strategic value of looking ahead. That subset included our policy team, which had used *Recombinant Education* to inform a new platform focused on competency-based education. That platform eventually led KnowledgeWorks to reorient its

support of schools. In addition, KnowledgeWorks' next CEO invited me to facilitate an internal engagement applying insights from the forecast to the question of organizational focus. That engagement led to the organization's current vision and mission focusing on personalized, competency-based learning. Despite those successes, there were many times when limited capacity and my own proclivities caused me to emphasize external engagements, where the work continued to gain traction, over internal application. I still struggled to make the Futures Studies work seem relevant to my colleagues and to articulate just how different the future might be from present-day innovations. Little did I realize at the time that such resistance is a predictable response that futurists in many settings need to navigate.

About a year after KnowledgeWorks' futures studies work had come to teeter on the brink of survival, I was able to advocate successfully for the creation of a new Futures Studies position. I was extremely fortunate to be able to hire a director of strategic foresight, Jason Swanson, a graduate of the University of Houston. We began to rebuild from the ashes, bringing a fresh set of perspectives into our engagement work and publishing scenario-based explorations of specific topics. In addition, we extended our use of immersive experiences through the creation of a website simulating possible future educator roles,³ and I wrote KnowledgeWorks' first piece focusing solely on taking action toward preferred futures.

This period of KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies work was marked by organizational skepticism and streamlining. However, it also included strategic uses of Futures Studies that lay the groundwork for the organization's current focus. The organization's futures studies work was re-growing, moving in a deeper and more informed direction as we built our internal capacity. We had moved well beyond the product to process but had slim resources at hand.

The Era of Partners in Code: New Methods, Fresh Approaches

With this new iteration of the work, KnowledgeWorks regularized our Futures Studies publication cycle by committing to publishing a new comprehensive 10-year forecast on the future of learning every three years. This commitment made planning and annual budget setting more predictable. As our communications function matured, we brought the design of our publications largely internal and became more intentional about how we publicized them. KnowledgeWorks had always created professionally designed, high-quality forecasts and creating both rigorous and beautiful foresight had always been important to me. Yet, this increased professionalism helped extend reach and impact.

In fall 2015, KnowledgeWorks published its fourth comprehensive forecast, *The Future of Learning: Education in the Era of Partners in Code*. While we originally intended for it to take the form of previous forecasts, it gathered a word count and a form of its own, becoming a much more complex physical product, as well as a more nuanced exploration of ideas. We benefited from having support in letting it become what it needed to be. We also had the leeway to try some new communications strategies, creating a video trailer⁴ before the forecast launched; hosting a student design challenge after its release; and creating an immersive experience with partners for a conference.

As part of this forecast cycle, KnowledgeWorks also published our first strategy guide on shaping the future of learning. In creating the strategy guide, we broadened our methodology, hosting three implications workshops exploring the opportunities and challenges facing K-12

education, postsecondary education and community-based learning. Hosting our own workshops accelerated KnowledgeWorks' understanding of how to work with this forecast in other contexts.

We reinvigorated our fee-for-service client engagements because we recognized that earning some revenue, instead of relying entirely on KnowledgeWorks' investment in the work, would help us do more and keep pushing the edge of our practice. In addition, we started to attract funding for Futures Studies publications and engagements. These included a regional adaptation of the Partners in Code forecast, district engagements related to extending public will and support for student-centered learning, and regional strategy guides responding to a deep dive on the future of readiness that we had published. These endeavors highlighted how difficult it can be to align Futures Studies offerings with clients' pressing concerns, as well as the limitations of spurring action through limited engagement. Yet, they also illustrated the power of bringing Futures Studies offerings to new platforms and connecting them with existing initiatives and concerns.

The Future of Learning: Redefining Readiness from the Inside Out, was one of four deep dives that KnowledgeWorks published during this forecast cycle. It took on a stature of its own, striking a chord with education audiences and achieving considerable distribution numbers. In 2018, it earned a Most Significant Futures Award from the Association of Professional Futurists. For me, receiving that award with co-authors Jason Swanson and Andrea Saveri marked a gratifying recognition of the re-growth that we had been nurturing since KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies program had barely survived in 2013. During this phase, we started to notice a shift in the reception of our work: even though we had begun emphasizing the exponential nature of change and highlighting possible impacts of artificial intelligence and machine learning, which tended to seem off-putting to education stakeholders – our audiences showed deeper acceptance that the world was changing. We encountered less resistance to our emphasis on looking ahead as more people had started feeling the effects of change in their daily lives.

Internally, we continued to identify targeted opportunities to apply our Futures Studies work to KnowledgeWorks' program areas. Colleagues on other teams incorporated aspects of some publications into their engagements with educators. Yet, KnowledgeWorks struggled to develop a coherent focus and statement of impact that included Futures Studies.

To help expand thinking about how the different areas of our work contributed to the organization's vision and mission, I led an effort to articulate a strategic framework for KnowledgeWorks. This framework borrowed from the Three Horizons Model (Coley, 2009) to illustrate how our Futures Studies, policy and practice work impacted the field of education on different time horizons. The framework helped promote a more inclusive understanding of organizational impact along with a more nuanced view of how KnowledgeWorks' program areas complemented one another. It also helped allay fears that each of our Futures Studies publications should have direct and immediate implications for our colleagues.

This phase of KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies works brought new methods and fresh approaches to our practice and greater integration with the rest of the organization. As part of that, the University of Houston graduate Katie King joined the team as director of strategic foresight engagement.

Navigating the Future of Learning: Deepening and Extending Practice

In fall 2018, KnowledgeWorks published its fifth comprehensive forecast, *Navigating the Future of Learning*. For the first time, we deliberately picked up on the big story of the previous forecast, continuing to explore the shape and possible impacts of the new era of partners in code that it had described. Even so, our fifth forecast found yet another material form and another approach to conveying provocations for the future of learning. Having seen some success with the earlier strategy guide, we published another, convening stakeholders across education sectors in mixed groups as our usage statistics had not supported the earlier delineation among them.

Honing our practice remains a dance. To achieve a better balance between our publishing and engagement activity and to give each publication more time to breathe, we plan to produce only three deep dives into topics raised by *Navigating the Future of Learning*. In addition, we are aiming to expand our use of immersive experiences, along with content formats and media, to take ideas from our publications more vivid and more broadly accessible. We are also aiming to attract higher-visibility media coverage and presentations; to create longer-term, more in-depth engagements with clients; and to help our partners build their Futures Studies capacity.

Internally, under the leadership of KnowledgeWorks' current CEO, the timing proved right for the organization to use *Navigating the Future of Learning* as a key input into the articulation of an aspirational goal that will serve as a north star for the organization's work. Engagements with staff and with our board solidified earlier efforts to facilitate understanding of this forecast with colleagues leading up to its launch (while KnowledgeWorks now has a deep appreciation of the value of Futures Studies, each publication requires internal strategies to maximize its utility). When we describe the work of KnowledgeWorks, we say that we are "creating the future of learning, together." There were moments when we did not know whether Future Studies work had a place within the organization. Now, it is central to the organization's work.

In addition, we have started more extensively and deliberately embedding the use of our Futures Studies publications and engagement techniques in convenings and projects led by other parts of the organization. There is now clear understanding of, and excitement about, the ability of Futures Studies to motivate audiences and to provide a rationale for change. An example of this use can be seen in a publication supporting our *State Policy Framework for Personalized Learning* that adapts information from *Navigating the Future of Learning* for policymakers. In addition, exploring the future in the context of a broader effort can make it easier for audiences who are unfamiliar with Futures Studies to understand its value. KnowledgeWorks' next internal horizon is to foster more ongoing engagement with, and application of, Futures Studies, including the mindsets that it invites, beyond that moment of visioning.

Another recent area of growth involved reaching beyond the education domain through a partnership with Capita, an ideas lab focused on how social and cultural transformations affect young children, to create a forecast on the futures of young children and their families. Together, the two organizations are seeking funding for the project, which required KnowledgeWorks to get better at helping funders understand the value of future studies. Working with an adjacent domain has stretched our thinking and promises to open another avenue for engaging stakeholders in improving social sector services and societal conditions. As with earlier publications, there remains an element of opportunism and creativity amid massive amounts of planning.

Whether through new assets, new forms of engagement, greater internal integration or the exploration of new domains, KnowledgeWorks has reached a moment of deepening and extending its Futures Studies practice atop the strong foundation that the team and the organization have rebuilt. Maintaining and growing our audiences and impact requires continued internal and external promotion and application. While the volume of work has often made it easiest to respond to incoming requests, we will need to continue to seek out new opportunities and approaches to keep the work fresh and impactful.

Reflections on Fourteen Years of Education Foresight

KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies journey has represented continuing organizational learning, much of it public. While this work continues to bring KnowledgeWorks significant reputational advantage, its reception and scope have been heavily influenced by organizational leadership, moment and culture. Parallel to that journey, my professional development journey has been one of moving from project to operational to strategic leadership while at the same time building competence in Futures Studies.

To recap elements of the narrative above, some of the key lessons learned have been:

- Engaging people in exploring the future is easier when they opt-in rather than when they are required to participate;
- Audiences who are unfamiliar with Futures Studies need help understanding what it is and what value it adds in their context;
- Connecting with people's interests and current realities can help make exploring the future more accessible;
- Providing space for people's emotional responses can help them process possibilities before doing more analytical sensemaking and more creative idea generation;
- Different types of tools and assets are effective in different settings and in response to different needs;
- Maintaining a futures studies practice is both structured and organic, involving experimentation followed by evaluation of results;
- The climate surrounding a Futures Studies practice can shift as audiences' experiences change and as a field evolves; and
- Maintaining a Futures Studies practice over time requires building and maintaining organizational buy-in and relaying alignment with other areas of an organization's work.

My colleague Jason Swanson emphasizes that “great care has to be taken upfront with clients to listen to what they want and need. It pushes us to think about the tools we use and allows for a level of co-creation of engagements with clients.” Reflecting on what we have learned in working with clients during his tenure with KnowledgeWorks, he observes, “the changes we have made in our workshop designs have helped bring people on board. Leading with emotional processing before more analytical work helps create buy-in for those whose participation is required.” In addition, “being up front in public engagements about the goals for our time together and helping folks understand that there is great value in simply asking questions about the future can help people engage without feeling pressured to have the future figured out in a few hours.”

In addition, my colleague Katie King reflects, “We have been in this unique position of doing internal futures work for the organization, external futures work for clients who have hired us and public thought leadership futures work for the broader field of education. KnowledgeWorks’ Futures Studies journey would have played out very differently if those three applications of the work had not all been happening simultaneously.”

For years now, KnowledgeWorks has generated a steady stream of rigorous Futures Studies publications. The specific ways in which the work added value have varied with the audience and moment. When KnowledgeWorks first released the 2006 map, there was a sense of awakening to a new way of looking at education. Now, more people in more kinds of education organizations seem attuned to attending the demands of the future, making KnowledgeWorks’ sustained and deep examination of the future of learning less distinct. Yet, the work continues to push people’s thinking and practice and has come to be relied on as a source of inspiration and awareness.

KnowledgeWorks continues to find ways to keep the work and people’s experiences of it fresh while also getting more pointed about important issues such as equity. In addition, we continue to hone our methods for understanding impact. That impact is perpetually hard to track and even harder to quantify; we may never hear about the ways in which our Futures Studies work has influenced an organization or individual or we may not hear about that influence until years later. For the past six years, KnowledgeWorks has been logging what impact we can through a thought leadership index that shows the arc of creating material, having it be advanced by others and achieving adoption or greater strategic influence.

In addition, KnowledgeWorks has started looking back at the future by writing retrospectives exploring how our comprehensive forecasts have played out.⁵ Now, that we have been doing this work long enough to have crossed some 10-year horizons, our audiences expect to receive some sense of how our forecasts have tracked. This line is a tricky one to walk, as no one involved in future studies is in the business of prediction. However, making a measured attempt to answer that obvious question helps assuage concerns about credibility.

The world is much less material than it was when KnowledgeWorks published its first forecast. That shift has changed the dynamics around how readers access our publications. At the same time, now that we and others have had more time to settle into the effects of the digital revolution, the organization exhibits less of an impulse to leap toward newer media and formats simply because they are novel. In addition to becoming more informed, our Futures Studies practice has also become more measured. We will continue to calibrate along these and many other dimensions.

There is still a sense of excitement among staff and external audiences when KnowledgeWorks releases a new comprehensive forecast. These triennial releases represent moments to reach and to dream. Even so, it continues to take time for people to learn about and relate to new material. At first, a new forecast feels alien because it is fresh and reaches farther than our last one. Then, people start seeing how things that they are noticing connect with it, and the drivers of change start seeming more familiar; the future possibilities, more possible.

Persistence has been key to the journey. While other people steered the course before me, I sometimes feel as if I acted as an erosive force that consistently, and often quietly, wore away at resistance, lack of comprehension and resource constraints – or rediverted because of them.

I have often felt like an insider-outsider, someone who occupies a fringe between today and tomorrow, between what we know to be true and what might be possible. Sometimes that has felt exciting; other times, deeply wearying. Walking that edge between the familiar and the unknown and helping education stakeholders bridge them while seeing themselves as creators of the future: that balance has lain at the heart of KnowledgeWorks' Futures Studies journey.



About the Author

Katherine Prince leads KnowledgeWorks' exploration of the future of learning. As Vice President, Strategic Foresight, she speaks and writes about the trends shaping education over the next decade and helps education stakeholders strategize about how to become active agents of change in shaping the future.

Since joining KnowledgeWorks in 2006, she has also led organizational development initiatives, contributed to national collaborations informed by the fields of systems thinking and organizational change, and managed programs to foster teaching and professional learning innovations and encourage collaborative knowledge management among educators. Earlier in her career, she supported large-scale changes in tutors' working practice at Britain's Open University by introducing online support and feedback systems. She also managed customer satisfaction improvement projects and established a technical communications group at Pacific Consulting Group, helping clients increase service quality by incorporating a customer perspective into their organizational planning.

She holds a BA in English from Ohio Wesleyan University, an MA in English from the University of Iowa and an MBA from The Open University. She earned a certificate in Foresight from the University of Houston, completed IFTF's foresight practitioner training, and is a member of the Association of Professional Futurists. Katherine Prince can be contacted at: PrinceK@knowledgeworks.org



About KnowledgeWorks

KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For nearly 20 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together.

Notes

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