This is a transcript of a video chat between Katherine Prince, vice president of strategic foresight, and Jason Swanson, senior director of strategic foresight, at KnowledgeWorks. This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Prince: Hello. I’m Katherine Prince. I work as Vice President of Strategic Foresight at KnowledgeWorks.

Swanson: And I am Jason Swanson. I work as the Director of Strategic Foresight here at KnowledgeWorks.

Prince: KnowledgeWorks is a national non-profit organization that seeks to co-create the future of learning with our partners in schools and districts and communities around the United States. We’re here today to talk about one of the posts from our “Futures Thinking Now” blog series. This post looked at ways of communicating the future to help people think about, in the context of COVID-19 and other disruptions, how we might convey effective images of the future to help people pursue the futures that they want.

Why do you think communicating the future is important?

Swanson: As futurists, we have a really tall order. We start our value proposition off with the idea that nobody can predict the future. But as an organization, as a learning community, as a person, our job is to convince you that change is coming, even though we can’t predict it and to spend, time, money and resources to prepare for that change.

Communicating the future, to me, is vitally important because we want to tell the story of possibility. In a lot of ways, we’re acting as that person who’s gazing out that window, telling folks about possibilities for those images on the horizon that exist outside of that window. It becomes a really important tool to
bring people along with this idea of framing change, preparing for change around outcomes that just might not happen, so it’s the ultimate on-ramp for getting people to think in that mode.

**Prince:** I think the communications dimension around future possibilities is critical for helping people not just engage with the future, as you describe, but also then have the foundation just to consider what they might do to create the future that they want. Yes, it’s one thing to have an insight about the future, but if we can’t convey it in a way that people can connect with, then it doesn’t really ever get into that action space or that strategy space.

**Swanson:** Yeah, for sure. We want images that people can connect with and empathize with or at least have an emotional reaction to, right?

**Prince:** Yeah, even if it’s a small one. It just takes a moment of seeing the world differently or seeing a possibility when one didn’t see before it can shift perspective and help people question assumptions. There’s a lot of different ways of communicating the future, and you pointed out that a lot of those are just everyday things that we don’t necessarily even think about as futurist tools.

**Swanson:** Yeah, we come into contact with the ideas about the future all the time. So we think about stories – sci-fi, dystopian futures, video games, podcasts, you name it – we’re surrounded by these ideas, but I think when we look within the context of a futurist’s toolbox there are some tried and true methods for communicating the future. Those would include things such as: scenarios and scenario planning, provocations of the future that would be on those shorter instances or scenario kernels, certainly artifacts of the future. We begin to look at things like design fiction and developing prototypes for things that just frankly don’t exist. Even more immersive and experiential futures, I think, are all worthy tools and exist within the futures toolbox, and I’m sure I’m forgetting things, too.

**Prince:** One of the other ones we’ve used sometimes are personas. That’s putting fictional characters in the future to help show how different groups of people or people in specific circumstances might interact with future possibilities. At KnowledgeWorks when we’ve combined personas with scenarios to help people think through, “What would this learner, for example, need in order to thrive in this future?” And for those who don’t know: scenario is just a story about the future, and it can be constructed in different ways, a different kind of features methodologies for doing that.

**KnowledgeWorks** has been exploring the future of learning since 2006. Other than scenarios and personas, what are some of those tools that **KnowledgeWorks** has used to communicate the future?

**Prince:** Even how we use scenarios has varied over the years. I think approximately 10 years ago, we put out the system-level scenarios, learning system of 2025, to look at some big factors. More recently, we tended to use scenarios in more granular ways when we’re taking a deep dive into a specific aspect of or question about the future. For example, scenarios for the future: “What it will mean to be ready for life beyond the K – 12 years?” I think those can be useful to calibrate it at different levels.

We’ve also used artifacts from the future probably less than scenarios but in a couple of specific ways. Again about a decade ago, we published a set of artifacts of the future that illustrated concepts that would help people imagine a specific thing or experience that could exist in the future. Then we wrote a forecast on the futures of young children and their families that came out last fall. The future possibilities were presented as artifacts, and they were illustrated in order to help people imagine them.
A lot of times it's easy to think about these kinds of things just being written or illustrated products that we publish, and we certainly do a lot of that. But sometimes the most powerful uses of them have been when we've created scenarios, personas and other tools for a particular context ready to engage people in a room or through some other kind of process and using those tools for sense making. Why does KnowledgeWorks use those tools to communicate the future?

**Swanson:** I think we try to pick the tool or the medium that is going to be most useful and speak to our readers and our audience. At least that's my take on it, and there's also the constraint, the reality of things like page limit and engagement style. Not every workshop or engagement needs to be sort of like an experiential future. Some folks only have two hours to get into something and do processing. We know it might be a paper or it'll be a digital product or whatever but whether it's scenario-based or artifact-based or provocations-based. We find that as we're exploring the materials, so I do think it's about kind of making the way, of sorts, of storytelling fit what we're finding out and what we're suggesting for the future. Sometimes in events, too, we're not just bringing in future possibilities we've thought of, but we're bringing in techniques to help people tell their own stories about the future, and those can be really powerful. Helping people tell stories or breakthrough change, based off some orientation to content that we've researched, or helping people storyboard kind of how they would get toward what they say they want for the future from what they are experiencing today. Generally, those are different takes on using narrative to help us find ourselves in the future so that we're not just imagining it out there, but we embody it with our own perspectives, our own values and our own sense of agency.

**Swanson:** Absolutely. One of the things I've always appreciated about that approach is it honors others, their lived perspective, their values about the future and allows for sort of a co-creation of a future space where we can move into those spaces together instead of like, “Well, here are archetypes, and this is what we think is going to happen and let's think about implication.” But it humanizes it, it personalizes it and, I think, respects, again, the lived experience and the wants and needs of the folks that are involved in that process.

**Prince:** You know, it makes me wonder about your experience in creating the Algorithmic Hiring Center simulation. We created it; once we got to run it together a couple of years ago, and then you were recreating it with partners to take it to SXSW Edu, which COVID prevented doing. But you were taking a different approach with it, and I'm curious of your reflections on how that storytelling and that particular simulation evolved.

**Swanson:** Like anything, you ask deeper questions about what you want an experience to be with different iterations, and one of the major strengths for that project was the fact that it was created in deep partnership with a number of organizations, all with a different viewpoint but with a common interest in transformation around learning – Dr. Temple Lovelace and Equity X Innovation, Ani Martinez and Remake Learning, John Balash at the Carnegie Mellon’s Entertainment Technology Center. A whole cohort of young ladies and high school age students who served as advisors really helped us ask critical questions about that experience. For us, the storytelling aspect was actually a narrowing down, whereas this first iteration was very broad “Let's go; let's get you hired; let's kind of riff on some ideas that we're seeing in the present around hiring and the future of work,” to say, “This would be a tighter experience if we were to really get super focused on one persona.” In this instance, looking at the hiring and the career decision-making processes on behalf of multiply marginalized girls and what that looks like. For us, this getting tighter in the storytelling made us get tighter in sort of the experience, made the messaging and the
why of the experience a little bit more clear and, certainly for me, relying on the deep expertise of all
the others involved help us tell a richer story. One day we’ll be able to deploy it in a post-pandemic
future. But it was valuable for me to tap into to the experience and viewpoint of others to make
stronger ideas about what might be possible in the future.

**Prince:** Whatever project we’re working on when we’re creating a product, it’s very collaborative –
sometimes just within KnowledgeWorks, within a foresight team and then with consultation across the
organization and other times more broadly. I think that’s a really important dimension of how we approach
creating future images. It’s not one person’s perspective; it can’t ever be because we all see partially.

**Swanson:** For sure. I think a key benefit to doing this work is that it starts with humility and that none
of us know the long-term future. I only have my perspective in the evidence that I could find out in
this moment for which I could make assumptions about how that might play out in the next 10, 20, 30
years, and, because of that, the future becomes a sacred space because we can engage in what I
would consider loose or dangerous talk because it’s assumptive. To get the most mileage out of those
assumptions and to really play in this uncertain space, you need a diversity of viewpoints. You have
to, whether it’s internal or external, really get useful nuanced views of the future, to check our own
assumptions and biases about what might be possible, to grow as human beings. There are very few
places like that where we can start off with, “I just don’t know. What do you think?” To me, that creates
almost like a sacred space around the futures that we cannot know together and that’s totally cool,
and, in fact, that’s almost desirable.

**Prince:** It’s also for me a very creative space, partly because there is that just lack of expertise, so we
often make it up together based on evidence. Once we’re working from the stories, we can tell today
about the future it’s a place to play and to imagine. I think that’s one of the exciting parts of exploring
the future and being able to communicate stories about it.

**Swanson:** Oh, for sure. To me, it is this lovely synergy between social science and art, and you have
to have these two married in a very deep way. Otherwise, what’s the utility? It’s got to be grounded
in near exhaustive research that has methodological underpinnings, yet at the same time you need
that creative thought to jump off from there and create these images that are compelling to someone.
Somebody’s got to like them or somebody’s got to be interested in not only what you say but how
you say it, and I think that is one of the untold skill sets for futures is: How do you make these stories
beautiful and compelling?

**Prince:** And a part of it, for me, is the words or the specific pictures or the experience of saying a future
possibility but also the visual design that surrounds it. It’s always been personally important to me to
kind of create beautiful foresights because, again, for me that helps get into whatever the ideas are.
Swanson: Oh, certainly, and that is one of the things that before I worked for KnowledgeWorks drove
me to really look deeply at the work being done here, specifically the Forecast 3.0 map of the future
of learning -- that infographic was hugely compelling. It was beautiful, it was readable, press hit, but
I went, “Oh, hey, like what is this thing? This is a really useful tool to communicate this and to spark
interest to go deeper. So that is one of the things that I always appreciated about the work even before
my time here.
We’ve been alluding to some of what we think make for good images of the future, but do you have other reflections on that question?

Swanson: I do, and I think sometimes it’s maybe a terminology issue. It’s not always what makes a good image of the future, and it’s maybe moreso what makes a useful image of the future. Truth be told, I had asked this question years ago to some colleagues within the Association of Professional Futurists, and Maree Conway (Hi, Maree. I hope you’re listening to this!) reframed it. She goes, “Maybe it’s not good; maybe it’s useful.” Because we look at good, and we look at the articulation of the creative of futures. We all have different styles we’re attracted to. Somebody might be more of an eloquent writer, or there’s certain design sensibilities that speak to us, that draw us in, and at the end of the day, it might not be: “Hey, I really like how that was written, but the material is compelling enough to incent action.” Now that action, there’s a lot of things that might constitute impact in action. It could be: “It drew me in, and I’m asking more critical or better questions about the future,” to, “I’m going to plan for these things or maybe there’s something here that we need to steer towards and begin to create.” It’s maybe a reframing to those images that have allowed me to do something, and I think that framing them is useful maybe is a place to start.

Now a good image will invite you in, and I think that if we look at dystopian images of the future, within the field, a lot of people have a lot to say about dystopian images: they’re easy; they’re lazy futures or whatever and it’s really easy to create a dystopian image. Yet if I look at my own orientation towards the future, it began with dystopian images as a kid looking at things that gave me nightmares that I wanted to avoid. It’s kind of like pop futures in a way. I don’t think those are any less useful Because it got me interested in the future. It gave me a viewpoint for which I can critique other images, so are those good? I don’t know. Maybe not. Are they useful? Yeah, absolutely. But what about you? How would you define a good image or even a useful image?

Prince: I think at the heart, for me, is that it’s something vivid that people can imagine, and that can be positive; it can be negative. Of course, those value judgments vary depending on one’s experiences and perspectives. But something that takes us out of the present, if only for a little while, so that we can engage in and at least partially inhabit a different space and then come back to the present and our responsibilities and preoccupations with a different perspective and questioning assumptions, varying the knowledge that we need to change course, even if we don’t yet know how to do that.

Swanson: I really like that and very much appreciate that.

Do you have any tips for people who are wanting to communicate the future?

Swanson: I’ll leave folks with one tip that was greatly influenced by Stuart Candy and something he said and that is to inject a bit of the mundane into our ideas of the future because a lot of times we’re like, “flying car, AI that’s going to do all the work,” all these things, but the past, in our present reality, point towards the fact that it is not all whiz-bang all the time. So if we’re looking at futures that get people to think that are ones we can empathize with, we need to think about what’s just the boring stuff that’s going to happen in 2040. What are people worried about? It’s not just this massive change that everybody all of a sudden is shaking things up and has transformed things in one way or the other, but how do we inject that sort of everyday nuance? What are those constants that are going to be leveraged out in the future? What are people worried about? How do they do the boring stuff? I would like to see more of that, and I think that they will create more nuance scenario and open up the doors to have almost a plurality of the future in a future.
Prince: I'm hearing it's a really humanizing perspective to really think about people's lived experiences of the future. I think it's really important in the future to find ways to connect with people's current context. Usually someone working with strategic foresight has an audience – whether it's a client in an organization or, in our case, education stakeholders broadly defined. If an image of the future is too far outside a person’s frame of reference or doesn't have the bridges to that frame of reference, then it isn’t useful; it just has to help cause people to freeze or ignore it and say, “It’s just not practicable.” So finding a way to be provocative while also building those bridges feels really important to me.

Swanson: I think that that's totally useful. Humanize it, see yourself in it, create those bridges. I think a lot of times, too, with our audience, it's a little bit different than a normal client because they don’t always know what it means to work with a futurist. It’s like we play dual roles: we educate you about the field while educating you about change. And I think creating those on-ramps, as you articulated, is vitally important. We don’t want to turn somebody off to the field, especially now, so I really appreciate that, Katherine.

Prince: Well, yeah, it's been fun to talk about communicating the future, and I'm sure we both have a lot more to say, but thank you for all who are listening. If you’d like to read more about this topic if you can go to KnowledgeWorks’ website at knolledgeworks.org to look at the Futures Thinking Now blog series, which also brings in other tools and dimensions of futures thinking to help people consider how to apply them in whatever current context they’re facing.