An Introduction to Human-Centered Learning
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This is a transcript of a webinar during which Katherine Prince, vice president of strategic foresight at KnowledgeWorks, and Jason Swanson, senior director of strategic foresight at KnowledgeWorks, explore human-centered learning. This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Swanson: My name is Jason Swanson. I work as the director of strategic foresight with KnowledgeWorks and I am honored to be joined by my colleague Katherine Prince, vice president of strategic foresight, and to share our work around our newest publication on human-centered learning with you all. For those of you who may not be familiar with KnowledgeWorks, we are a national nonprofit dedicated to the notion of creating the future of learning, together. We work deeply within the system of education from thinking through what futures of learning might look like to advocating for transformational policy and to work hand-in-hand with learning communities as they work to scale up personalized, competency-based learning.

As I mentioned, today we’re going to be taking a quick tour of our newest publication, called Envisioning Human-Centered Learning Systems. Our goal today is to get you some information both about the publication, how we define human-centered learning, the importance we see about aspirational visions of the future and to highlight a few strategies, and of course take your questions.

As we work our way through the presentation, if you have any questions, please feel free to add those to the chat and we’ll be sure to respond as we’re able at the end of the session.

I want to start this off with a question, I think the question right now as we look at a lot of disruptive change is this notion of, “What do you want for the future of learning?”

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I’d like to invite you as we work through this presentation to add your thinking and to really describe your own vision for the future of learning, adding adjectives to the chat box. I want to encourage you to be as bold as possible as you work to both imagine and describe what your own visions for the future of learning are.

With that said, let me give a really, really quick primer on futures thinking.

At KnowledgeWorks, I’m very proud to be part of a team of four very, very talented futurists. We are blessed to be able to explore long range futures for learning and for education.

What you see here on the screen is something called the cone of plausibility. It’s not really a foresight method, but it is a fantastic foresight teaching tool. It’s used to do a few things. For our purposes, it’s used to describe that the future is many and not one.

A lot of time, futurists refer to what we call the three Ps. This includes plausible futures. These are things that if we look at the bounds of uncertainty and change have a decent chance of happening. Possible futures means anything could happen, and indeed, anything could happen. I could win the lottery. It’s
probably not likely, but it’s possible. Our third P is my favorite P. It’s the preferable future; it’s the vision. So the major difference here is that we might say that plausible and possible futures really deal with inbound change. We’re making assumptions about that change. We’re thinking about what kind of futures they might create.

Preferable futures on the other hand are more firmly rooted in outbound change. This is what we want to happen. This is how we’re going to respond to those changes. So rather than be rooted in assumption, they’re more rooted in our values. They’re signaling to the world what we want for the future, similar to the question I asked all of you when we opened this up. They’re really acting as a north star, so as we navigate change, how are we going to adopt our plans and design new offerings to bring us closer to those visionary futures.

Now for us, this new publication acts in part as a manifesto of sorts. It describes our vision for learning. We really need educational futures that are radically different than what we’re seeing today. Our vision for human centered learning is one that provides each child and adult involved in education the opportunities and supports they need to thrive.

We need to align educational structures, policies, practices and learning experiences around the flourishing and well-being of people while cultivating responsibility for society and the planet. This new vision promises to help us navigate what we would describe as an era shift that is underway.

Vision is critical – outbound change – articulation of values, especially critical in times of deep change. Education and life in the midst of deep change right now, or era shift due to many factors: exponential tech, demographic changes, climate volatility, social change.

For the past six plus years, we’ve been describing something we call a big story of change. We frame this as an era shift in that we are looking at really, really deep structural changes. There are a multitude of reasons for this ranging from exponential advances in technology, accelerating social change, looking at things like climate volatility. It’s always, always, always important, from our point of view, to have a very clear understanding of that vision, of what we want from the future. We believe it’s especially important in times of deep disruption to 1) interrogate the visions we hold, to make sure in the face of scrutiny, they still hold up; and 2) to work as that north star to chart a path through disruption so we can think critically about how we are going to channel our energies and resources to create that future.

I’m going to sit back and invite Katherine in to begin a deeper dive into some of these aspects that we call human-centered learning.

Prince: Thank you, Jason. As we explored human-centered learning, which had been a possibility, or a provocation, we had raised in a forecast and were excited about and wanted to understand better, we came up with four vision elements.

The first of those is that human-centered learning would help liberate young people to participate fully in society, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, immigration status or other factors.

When we interviewed folks in education and other disciplines related to human-centered learning, they described this element as helping learners develop a growing understanding of their identity and of their purpose and agency through engagement, reflection and expression.
An important dimension of this vision element is **critical consciousness**, a learner’s deep understanding of the interplay between their self-concept and society.

We came to understand that engaging in critical civic inquiry about how societal structures and processes create systems of power, privilege and oppression can help learners understand how **systemic structures** frame and perpetuate societal issues. It can also help them explore how they might act to change those systemic structures and to create more equitable and sustainable societal outcomes.

When we look to the future, we identify **signals of change**, or early indicators, that show how future possibilities are beginning to unfold today.

Two signals of change illustrate how work is underway to provide students **opportunities to develop their agency and critical consciousness working towards this possibility** of being liberated to participate fully in society.

The first of those signals is **City of Bridges High School**. Based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it integrates a student-led, project-based curriculum with a foundation of mindfulness. Students cultivate their agency by participating in all school committees and governance structures and also by contributing to community-based projects. They engage in daily meditation and training in practices of loving-kindness, empathy and benevolence, which serves the school’s goal of transforming the world into a measurably more positive place.

In another example, the nonprofit **Community Works Institute** focuses on developing students as active citizens who are empowered to use critical inquiry and creative problem solving to improve their own communities. The institute partners with educators across the United States to help them reimagine their teaching practice and their relationships with students through the lens of place-based service-learning, sustainability and social justice.

Moving on to the next vision element. It calls for schools to organize for love and belonging.

As we explored human-centered learning, we came to understand that it is fundamentally **care-based**. It cultivates love and belonging for students, as well as for the many adults who play a part in students’ learning journeys.

**Companionate love** — defined as feelings of affection, compassion, caring and tenderness for others — provides the supportive conditions for healthy neurological growth and secure attachment, which are key in buffering against the various stressors that learners face.

The goal is to provide every learner with the security and reliability of a safe and supportive base of care from which they can own their learning and engage confidently with the world.

Schools that organize for love would also create new systems and model relationships that don’t perpetuate trauma and inequity. In addition, learning communities with this orientation prioritize **supports for educators**. These would need to include high-quality professional learning experiences, but they would also include shared power, support for risk taking and professional respect.

Having such a foundation of **emotional security** promises to help learners, educators, and families contribute to others’ well-being and develop the creativity, confidence and inclusive practices necessary for them to face life’s uncertainties, as well as its challenges and opportunities.
Two examples again illustrate how some education organizations are prioritizing love and belonging today.

In an effort to **scale social-emotional learning**, states such as Connecticut have been working to integrate holistic social-emotional learning and cultural competence across schools, health agencies and other student-serving organizations. These programs also aim to support teachers in developing their own social-emotional skills so they have support in becoming more resilient and develop their ability to listen to and support each child with compassion.

In another example, Dr. Howard Stevenson of the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education works nationally with schools, educators and parents to **develop racial literacy skills** that help them identify, read and recast stressful racial encounters. His approach leverages in-the-moment therapeutic play, storytelling and emotion navigation skills to resolve stress and promote healing.

The third vision element of human-centered learning articulates the need for leadership to be intentionally inclusive and co-creative.

Human-centered learning ecosystems, if they came to exist, would have leadership structures and processes that were actively inclusive of many forms of difference. They intentionally promote interdependence, shared power and co-creation among all stakeholders.

This kind of leadership would aim to cultivate a **dense network of connections** to dismantle inequitable systems and structures. This shared leadership goes beyond simply consulting with people or seeking support for an institutional path. It needs to involve resetting relationships with learners, families and communities and then authentically including them in decision making from that point forward.

One interviewee described this approach as a shift from traditional, hierarchical leadership roles to more **horizontal partnerships** that encourage distributed power and innovation.

In a human-centered learning system, **all educators would also be able to act as leaders** at the same time they were encouraging participation and leadership from students, parents, community members and colleagues.

Another dimension is that education organizations would build co-creative relationships with other agencies and institutions working to address students’ and families’ needs. For example, they might collaborate with organizations addressing health, housing, food, transportation or environmental justice to build webs of support and to solve shared problems collectively.

A couple of current examples show how some stakeholders are already **engaging in collaborative activities** to address the reality that the needs of children, youth and their families span institutions.

In the first, the **Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model** is a framework for addressing health in schools. It was devised by the Centers for Disease Control and ASCD and it focuses on the link between health and academic achievement and is structured to help communities and states support schools and learner health.

In another example, **The Othering Institute**, which is a nonprofit based at the University of California, Berkeley, works with stakeholders to identify and eliminate barriers to improving young people’s life prospects. They also work to promote inclusion and enhance and sustain equitable policies and
programs. The Institute uses a Targeted Universalism approach to develop leaders’ capacity to identify group-specific solutions to shared challenges.

The fourth and last element of our vision for human-centered learning is for learning to become a lifelong personal practice.

This means that every student would be supported in developing personal routines, practices and habits for tackling learning needs and fulfilling their aspirations. We know that everyone is going to need to pursue lifelong learning, especially given the need for ongoing reskilling and upskilling as people move through their careers amid a changing employment landscape.

Developing an intentional and self-directed practice of learning and growth promises to help children and youth develop the agency and also the skills needed to push through learning plateaus, acquire and grow and achieve their goals. It can help them build useful learning support systems. It can also set the foundation for lifelong learning.

Approaching learning as a lifelong personal practice has implications for both the design of learning experiences and assessment. Assessment will need to shift from providing comparative and relatively reductive views of learners’ knowledge and skills to depicting rich portraits of their behaviors, practices and habits.

Both learning experiences and assessments will need to be informed by supportive, developmental conversations with teachers and the other adults who serve as peers and mentors and guides. Those conversations would focus on helping students discover their motivations for learning as well as their most effective practices.

Personalized learning provides an excellent starting point for making these kinds of shifts. Human-centered learning would push even further by overhauling education systems to revolve around the children, youth and adults who occupy them.

Again, here there are a couple of signals of change that illustrate ways in which students are gaining more autonomy in directing, planning and assessing their own learning today.

In one, an independent high school in Cleveland, Ohio, Mastery School of Hawken, focuses on cultivating students’ lifelong learning practices. It combines opportunities for real-world problem-solving and personalized mentoring relationships, along with a Master Transcript view of the learner’s strengths and experiences.

In another example, the long-established EL Education network supports students in taking ownership of their work. Students engage in real-world, project-based learning expeditions; they complete self-directed assessments; and they deepen their relationships with the natural world and communities through service.

**Strategies for making human-centered learning a reality**

In exploring the promise of human-centered learning, we identified four strategies that seem viable for helping people bring these vision elements to life, and not just make specific bits and pieces of change but really undertakes the systemic change we’re describing.
The first strategy is to model learning as a personal practice, which would mean helping learners really see what it means to have a learning practice and to help them develop the skills needed to keep pursuing learning beyond the classroom and across their lifetimes.

Expanding assessments to include rubrics and reflective prompts is one way of doing that. And performance-based and self-directed assessments are also a broader way of helping students take ownership of their learning. Creating learning practice portfolios can also help students assess how they learn and examine the daily routines and strategies that support their learning.

The second strategy is to prioritize relational competencies as essential skills. Relational competencies include social-emotional skills, racial literacy and cultural navigation skills. Together, they support educator and learner practices that we see as being essential for driving human-centered learning.

A big area of action here is for schools, districts and other organizations that can help individuals and organizations and education systems build capacity in this area. They can also design supports for educators’ personal and professional self-care across their careers.

The third strategy is to co-create with learners authentic learning experiences that build their agency and impact and reflect their spheres of concern. This kind of learning can provide students with opportunities to contribute actively to their communities. Integrating critical inquiry into learning experiences can help students examine issues and analyze the assumptions, values and power structures at play.

In addition, working to build learners’ and educators’ social capital can help both groups have access to people and organizations that can contribute to authentic and impactful learning experiences.

The fourth and last strategy is to build organizational connections for equitable responses. Building connections with other social systems and institutions can help stakeholders unravel structures of oppression and inequity and enable all students to access relevant and equitable opportunities for learning and development.

These connections will be most valuable where the contributors’ combined efforts add up to more than those of any single entity. And it will be important to build open channels of communication and co-creation with the people organizations are aiming to serve. Lastly, developing relationally competent leadership will be essential for ensuring inclusion in systems and processes and distributing power.

So with that quick overview of our vision for human-centered learning and supportive strategies, Jason and I would like to turn now to your questions about our ideas or about other things that they spark for you.

Why is human-centered learning particularly important now?

Prince: Thank you. I view human-centered learning as being particularly important at this time because we’re well aware that our education systems aren’t doing enough to support learners and aren’t resourced in the way we need them to support learners. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular raised to a broader consciousness the inequities and the longstanding shortfalls that our systems have been struggling with.

We need to imagine new possibilities for the learners who are affected by education systems today and
we also need to be getting ready to have learning better support people for a very different world.

**How do you balance caring for humans while also caring for the world and the environment?**

**Prince:** In terms of how to balance caring for humans and the planet, we see those as very interconnected. This vision for human-centered learning doesn’t mean to be exclusive to humans. It means to be more holistic so that we’re thinking about well-being very broadly both for people and then for the planet. Part of what human-centered learning would aim to do is help learners have a societal and planetary conscience, so they and others are contributing more effectively to those big societal and global issues.

**Swanson:** An additional detail for that second question is that this isn’t an either / or question, or, rather, an either / or response. If we’re going to be really, really serious about orienting systems around people, and orienting them around justice and equity, then we have to recognize intersectionality in that to care for a person in this mode means that you care for the planet as well. So the answer moves from either / or to both / and.

**Can you go a little bit deeper into relationships? The reciprocity of relationships seems to be missing. What are your thoughts on the quality of relationships?**

**Prince:** In regards to relationships, I agree they would need to be reciprocal. I think that’s what we’re hoping to get at in highlighting the need for both individuals and organizations to develop greater skills in relational competency both in day-to-day interactions and at the leadership level. Relationships are of course central to the teaching and learning exchange or enterprise. We need to develop skills in being able to be effective in building those relationships across difference and across different points in learners’ lives.

**How do we balance the momentum to incorporate technology into just about everything in education against personalized learning, recognizing, confirming and supporting personal dispositions and aspirations?**

**Swanson:** This gets back for me, when we look at this tech infusion, if we look at the uncertainty our systems are facing and the hard choices that districts are going to make in the coming years, with the assumption that they’re going to face more austerity, is to back and say, if we’re looking at more tech-enhanced learning, more technologically mediated environments, what really is our vision for this? If we’re very clear about ... if our vision element does include our young people at the center, then does our deployment and use of technology become an additive or is it extractive? Can we deploy the technology to create deeper conditions for humans to connect? Or is this a race to the bottom? We’re giving you adaptive learning and saying, “We are doing the thing. We have met the future.” That’s sort of how I see it. I’m not sure if that fully addresses the question.
How might other systems need to change - economic, political, etc. - to fully realize a human-centered vision? Are the signals in other systems that could provide us with this momentum?

Swanson: So signs or indications that other systems are changing and/or what are the ways other systems might need to change? Wow, that’s a really, really great one. And I want to give the asterisks here that this is my perspective on this. So, looking at employment moving away from extractive modes of employment and creating value to ones that are co-created and actually additive. Looking at companies commodify people versus companies that stand people up are a great example of that in terms of trying to begin to move the economy, if we stay within a capitalist system versus one that can more fully support the human condition. If we look at the incoming [presidential] administration’s plan of investing billions, if not trillions, of dollars into green infrastructure. We’re starting to look at powerful plans and intentions from elites to prioritize the environment in ways that maybe we haven’t before, so to think about environmental stewardship a little bit differently. Those are just two very small examples. Katherine, I don’t know if you have any ideas about this.

Prince: A big one that all of the systems need to be addressing is structural racism - education, economy, politics and so forth. That’s a big impediment to being able to really change peoples’ life outcomes for those that are affected by that.

Swanson: With that, I think we’re actually at time. Thank you everyone. It was an honor to spend this half hour with you. Katherine, it was an honor to get to share this work with you as well. We will send out the slide deck when we’re done. Just to give a short plug, we’re very happy to announce that earlier this week we put out another publication highlighting future tensions on the horizon that education futures are facing. That is a great companion piece to this line of thinking.

Prince: Thank you all for joining us.