Opportunities for Creating the Future of Learning

The 2020 Forecast highlights the need for “schools” and centers of learning to be life-affirming organizations-for learners, their families, educators, and the broader community. Secondly, it emphasizes the need for learning to be an ongoing process whereby we all become engaged citizens of a global society. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this forecast illuminates the vital need for everyone concerned about learning—not only education “insiders,” but also the powerful innovators on the periphery—to get involved in actively creating the future of learning. Our ability to meet the social, economic, health, and climate challenges of the next several decades depends on our heeding these messages from the future.

Resilient School Communities

As the future unfolds, schools will emerge as critical sites for promoting health, environmental vitality, academic growth, student wellbeing, and connections across their communities. In the best case, they will become focal points for interventions focused not only on educating resilient students, but also on promoting resilience in their communities. Schools will become dynamic, community-wide systems and networks that have the capacity to replenish themselves in the context of change.

Creating resilient school communities will require educators, families, and other citizens to develop new capacities. We will need to deepen both our networking power and our ability to use interactive media to form groups and catalyze action. In so doing, we will need to encourage “distributed innovation” that extends beyond the boundaries of any one organization or community, and we will need to create platforms for collaborating and applying the “collective intelligence” of many individuals to form our resilience strategies. Finally, educators, families, and other citizens will need to be transparent about the impacts of social, economic, and biological stresses on our communities.

Amplified Educators and Learners

By embracing technologies of cooperation, prototyping new models of learning, and cultivating open and collaborative approaches to leadership, “amplified” educators and learners will become the organizational “superheroes” of schools and districts. Their approaches will challenge institutional hierarchies and policies but will also provide the exemplars of, and provocations for, innovation. Watch for signs of amplification outside and at the edges of the formal system—in such places as home school networks, independent schools, after-school programs, and community-based learning programs.

A Global Learning Economy

Geographic and digital migrations will facilitate the global movement of families, identity, values, educational resources, social capital, and innovations, thereby contributing to an increasingly global learning economy. As such migrations become routine features of modern life, they will drive diverse new demands for rights to, and resources for, learning. The creation and exchange of learning resources, environments, and experiences will form a global learning ecosystem, with families developing personal learning ecologies that span national boundaries. The globalization of open learning systems characterized by cooperative resource creation, evaluation, and sharing will change how educational institutions view their roles and will offer new forms of value in the global learning ecosystem. Education institutions will no longer be exclusive agents of coordination, service provision, quality assurance, performance assessment, or support. In fact, other players might be more equipped to provide these functions in the distributed ecosystem.

Design as Philosophy

New tools and approaches to designing learning experiences will deepen our capacity to personalize learning. Data about preferences and interactions, as well as collaboration trails (such as records of where learners travel on the Internet and how they contribute to group activities and interact with others), will create new streams of information about learners’ experiences and performance. Visualization tools will provide new ways of seeing data and of developing insight into learner support. In addition, neurological advances will help us make connections between specific physical and virtual environments and their impacts on cognition and brain health. The result will be an emerging toolset for designing personalized, learner-centered experiences and environments that reflect the differentiation among learners instead of forcing compliance to an average learning style and level of performance. At the community level, maker economies will elevate design as a practical problem-solving capacity that applies across community issues and helps empower local resilience.

Contested Authorities

As the hierarchical structure of education splinters, traditional top-down movements of authority, knowledge, and power will unravel. Before new
patterns get established, it will seem as if a host of new species has been introduced into the learning ecosystem. Authority will be a hotly contested resource, and there will be the potential for conflict and distrust.

With measurement strategies and metrics producing mountains of information, we will need to decide what data are important, what they mean, and how we can act upon them. We will also need to explore how we can fairly evaluate performance when we are altering our minds and bodies through environmental hazards and physical experiments. Standardized testing is already surrounded by controversy, but new metrics and measurements will emerge from a variety of places outside education.

It remains to be seen whether new learning agents and traditionally certified teachers will cooperate or compete. While we can expect third-party learning agent certification to emerge, in many cases, the absence of regulation will mean that self-monitoring and reciprocal accountability will be the best methods for ensuring quality.

**Diversifying Learning Geographies: Deserts and Oases**

As learning resources proliferate in neighborhoods and cities around the world, communities will become the world’s classrooms. Learning geographies will diversify as some communities become learning deserts barren of learning resources, while others become oases teeming with dynamic learning ecosystems. These learning ecosystems will make use of social and reputation capital, which will help communities build trust and locate resources; frameworks for cooperation, which will create incentives for participating in the collective generation of resources and for coordinating learning exchanges; and mechanisms for making learning visible, such as e-mail lists, websites, and sophisticated visual maps of resources.

Learning geographies will be accessible to communities through a range of key tools, such as data aggregated from disparate sources, geo-coded data linking learning resources and educational information to specific community locations, and visualization tools that help communicate such information in easily understood visual and graphic forms. Such information will often contain multiple layers of data (for example, school performance statistics, poverty rates, and the degree of access to fresh food).

These new dimensions of learning geographies will require new core skills. Among them will be navigating new visual cartographies, identifying learning resources in previously unexpected places, leveraging networks to take advantage of learning opportunities, and creating flexible educational infrastructures that can make use of dispersed community resources. Through enhanced visibility and accessibility, learning geographies will bring new transparency to issues of equity in learning.

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