

pioneering

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A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

Kelly Young, Director

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connect. share. discover. lead.

pioneering

Dear Friends,

As we shared in an earlier issue, we are excited to be launching a national community of practice—**Pioneer Lab**—made up of pioneer practitioners digging deeply into what it takes and means to bring learner-centered education to life. Back in May, we hosted the first of many trainings that we are offering to those interested in joining the Lab. The trainings are designed to equip pioneers with common lenses and “shared language” so that they can enter the Lab able to talk, learn, and collaborate across their many different models.

Two weeks ago, we hosted the second of these trainings with 62 pioneers in Washington, DC. This group of pioneers came from all across the country, representing a whole array of learning environments and organizations: 2Revolutions; Alamo Heights ISD (TX); Charleston County School District (SC); Collective Shift—LRNG; Colorado Education Association; Denver Public Schools (CO); Design39Campus (CA); Education Evolving; Furr High School (TX); Griptape; Institute for Personalized Learning; Institute for Habits of Mind; Iowa BIG; Lindsay USD (CA); MC² Charter School (NH); Mesa County Valley School District 51 (CO); Mt. Vernon Presbyterian School (GA); Remake Learning (PA); RI-CAN; RSU 2 (ME); Springhouse Community School (VA); Summit Public Schools (CA & WA); Teton Science Schools (WA); and Transcend.

As we experienced in Denver and have seen with all of the pioneers we encounter, this group came together with an incredible, shared commitment to making learner-centered education available to ALL kids. We left the convening energized and eager to continue our work together!

We hope you enjoy this issue of *Pioneering*, which has great perspectives, tools, and profiles from a diversity of learner-centered pioneers, including a founding member of Design39Campus in San Diego, ReSchool Colorado, Education Evolving, Boston Day and Evening Academy, and more.

Warm wishes,
Kelly

P.S. If you are interested in learning more about Pioneer Lab and what it means to be a part of this growing national community of practice, we'd love to hear from you. Our next training will be offered in January 2017 in Atlanta, GA.



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Connect. Share. Discover. Lead.
We seek to accelerate the growth of the movement dedicated to transforming education in America. We invite those excited and interested by the possibility of learner-centered education to discover more, join a growing movement, and begin a journey to make this a reality in diverse communities across the country.





BOSTON DAY AND EVENING ACADEMY

Roxbury, Massachusetts



I get support and love. I get encouragement to do better. I found a better me.” —BDEA Student

A SENSE OF BELONGING. Of being valued. Of being trusted. Of being known. That is what you feel when you enter the halls of Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA).

That is no small feat. The learners who attend BDEA are there precisely because they didn't "belong" in their traditional high schools. For one reason or another, they were considered "off-track." Many are overage for high school; others dropped out because of family or life circumstances. Some were held back, yet didn't feel they were being supported to move forward. Each BDEA learner arrives with a sense of being excluded—with a longing to find a "home." And, what BDEA offers is just that—a community that will believe in them, challenge them, and support them to be the people they know they can be.

This all starts with a focus on transitions and a recognition that they can be bumpy. BDEA learners are coming from situations—like becoming a parent at sixteen—that make it difficult for them to get their bearings. So, everything about BDEA is designed to provide the structures and supports needed for them to feel confident in the path ahead.

Learners spend their first four days at BDEA in "orientation"—a time when their educators can get to know them. Educators delve into who each kid is as an individual and as a learner: where they're coming from, where they are in their learning, and where they want to go. This is the foundation upon which BDEA builds their **socially embedded** culture.

An eleven-week seminar (or one trimester at BDEA) follows these intensive orientations. Another structure designed to cushion the transition, the seminar is an opportunity for learners to get to know each other and figure out what it means to learn in a **competency-based** system. At BDEA, there are no grades of any kind. Instead, content areas are broken into 11-week modules—each with associated benchmarks against which learners demonstrate their competence. So, they progress according to their skill development, not their age or time spent in a seat. During the seminar, they identify their starting points—what skills and knowledge they are coming in with and which module they'll begin with.

This emphasis on ensuring smooth transitions doesn't end there. Each learner emerges from their 11-week seminar with their own Roadmap to Graduation. This tool accompanies them along their journey through BDEA and beyond. From the very beginning, learners are asked to think about post-graduation—what will they do after BDEA? How will they ensure they are ready? These questions come up early for a reason. By the time each learner leaves BDEA (whether that happens in one or four years), they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and habits to answer them.

Don't worry—that's not all. A transition coordinator stays in touch nine months after graduation to provide advice, support, and encouragement as learners embark on their next adventures. And, from feeling cast out or "off-track," these learners are taking the world by storm.

LEARN MORE

[Reading the Pulse of Students at Boston Day and Evening Academy](#)

[Learn about BDEA from our students!](#)

FACTS & FIGURES

Alternative Public Charter High School

1 high school

405 learners

Over 800 graduates

ELL or Primary Language other than English: 9.2%

Students with Disabilities: 23.9%

Free or reduced lunch: 99.7%

Economically disadvantaged: 46.1% (as assessed by whether a family is accessing services, such as Section 8 housing, food stamps, and Medicaid)

CONNECT

[Website](#)

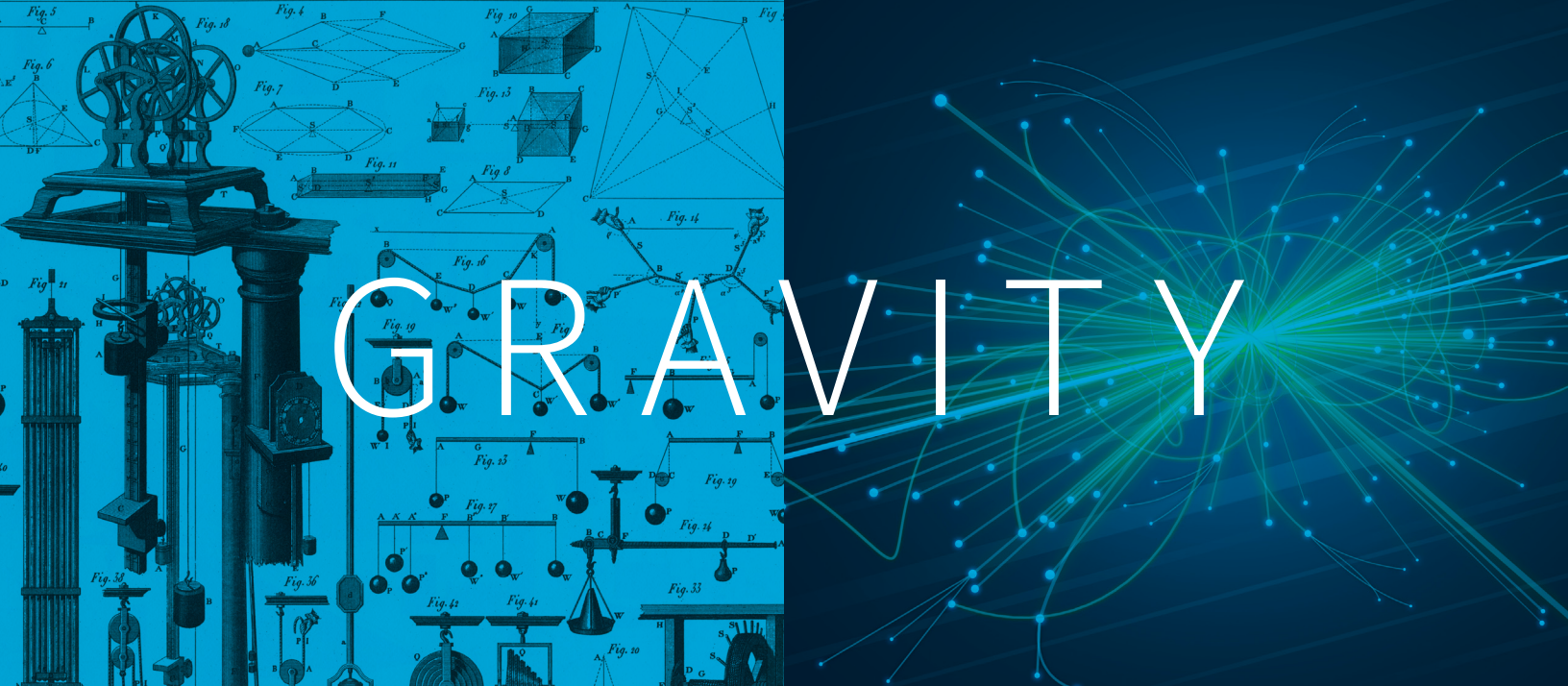
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GRAVITY

GETTING TO LEARNER-CENTERED

It's a Paradigm Shift. So What?

by Kelly Young

AT EDUCATION REIMAGINED, we have always highlighted the importance of recognizing learner-centered education, first and foremost, as a paradigm shift. And, it's no accident that we do. Our best articulation, so far, of that paradigm shift can be found in our vision document:

The learner-centered paradigm for learning functions like a pair of lenses that offers a new way to look at, think about, talk about, and act on education. It constitutes a shift of perspective that places every learner at its center, structures the system to build appropriate supports around him or her, and acknowledges the need to adapt and alter to meet the needs of all children.

The learner-centered paradigm changes our very view of learners themselves. Learners are seen and known as wondrous, curious individuals with vast capabilities and limitless potential. This paradigm recognizes that learning is a lifelong pursuit and that our natural excitement and eagerness to discover and learn should be fostered throughout our lives, particularly in our earliest years. Thus, in this paradigm, learners are active participants in their learning as they gradually become owners of it, and learning itself is seen as an engaging and exciting process. Each child's interests, passions, dreams, skills, and needs shape his or her learning experience and drive the commitments and actions of the adults and communities supporting him or her. ("A Transformational Vision for Education in the US." *Education Reimagined*, 2015. Page 5.)



Kelly Young

Learner-centered education isn't the newest way to "do" education. Nor is it a new "to do" list or set of activities to add onto your work. Because it is a paradigm shift, it actually offers a new worldview and demands a mindset shift. It becomes a new way to...well, be. And, that changes everything.

TALKING ACROSS PARADIGMS

A couple of weeks ago, we heard the paradigm shift equated to the shift between classical and quantum physics. If you know anything about physics, you know that these are two wholly different ways of seeing the world: two paradigms. Depending on which you are in, you ask different questions, make different assumptions, use different means of measurement, and relate to yourself and your role in the inquiry differently. In essence, everything changes—including what you say the universe is made of!

Despite all of this, both understandings of physics use similar words, such as "gravity." But, the "gravity" of classical physics and the "gravity" of quantum physics point to such different phenomena as to be mutually unintelligible. In classical physics, gravity is a "force" that is calculated by a ratio of the mass of and distance between objects. In quantum physics, on the other hand, gravity is a curvature in the space-time continuum caused by objects with mass—not a "force" at all.

So, you can see the difficulties that might emerge if you were to try to talk across paradigms. You may be using the same words and think you are talking about the same thing—failing to realize that you aren't even in the same universe as the other person.

Your paradigm is so intrinsic to your mental process that you are hardly aware of its existence, until you try to communicate with someone with a different paradigm.

—DONELLA MEADOWS, *THE GLOBAL CITIZEN*

We believe the same thing occurs for the five elements of the vision: competency-based; personalized, relevant, and contextualized; learner agency; open-walled; and socially embedded. For example, in a school-centered paradigm, when someone says "personalized," they mean that you meet the child academically where they are in a subject and move them along a predetermined path to proficiency. In a learner-centered paradigm, on the other hand, "personalized" means that you co-create learning pathways with the child sitting in front of you—seeing them as a whole child and valuing their interests, passions, concerns, brain wiring, language, circumstances, family, and culture.

This means that an adult "personalizing" learning in a learner-centered paradigm will do things that would never occur to an adult in a school-centered paradigm, and vice versa. In each, they will start with different first steps, ask different questions, develop different tools, have different assumptions, and request different parameters for their learning environment. Just like in physics, despite using the same words, totally different realities are at work.

WORKING IN A NEW PARADIGM

This is an important distinction to notice: The five elements can be implemented in both a school-centered and a learner-centered paradigm. But, they will look and feel drastically different. This is because, if you haven't shifted your view of the purpose of education, the learner, how learning happens, and the role of the adults, you will see the five elements as a means to make the current model of education run more efficiently.

And, when you start from a place of seeking efficiency, you get the current system on steroids. "Competency-Based" becomes self-paced learning. "Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized" loses the last two qualifiers and becomes kids in front of computers receiving the academic "program" designed to move them from point A to point B in a school curriculum. "Learner Agency" becomes allowing kids to choose how they want to present what they learned about Eskimos to the class—book report, diorama, or podcast. "Open-Walled" becomes flipped classrooms. "Socially Embedded" becomes 20-minute advisory periods for kids to make sense of their course work and life trajectory in collaboration with other learners.

These are all predictable outcomes that emerge when implementing the five elements in a school-centered paradigm. Why are they so predictable? A paradigm is a closed set of beliefs, and these underlying beliefs or assumptions set the boundaries for what can be seen from that paradigm. So, in the case of the school-centered paradigm, it is a closed set of beliefs about kids, how they learn, what they are to learn, how to measure their learning, what education is, and how it should be done.

If you dig a bit into the Industrial-era model for education, you can unearth some of those assumptions that drive us to redesign the current system again and again: There is an average learner. If you teach one way, you will reach 70-80% of kids. Education is done to kids. The job of the whole system is to move students from (pre-) kindergarten to 12th grade. These create a mindset that focuses on the "system" itself and poses the challenge: how can we build "schools" to efficiently educate lots of kids at once and deliver them from PK/K to 12th grade successfully? Coming from here, standardization is the most obvious, logical answer, as it creates an avenue for all kids to know the same things and be able to demonstrate their knowledge equally well in the same way at the same time.

Some of the underlying assumptions of the learner-centered paradigm, on the other hand, are that the work of education is learning; education is done by and with the learner; and there is no average learner. These assumptions create a mindset that demands the creation of a system that adapts to the individual learner—leveraging their strengths and passions and recognizing their challenges and circumstances.

From this angle, you can see that these two models are not good or bad, right or wrong. They are just different—created out of different ways of seeing the world. You can also see that if you can't overlook the paradigm or mindset, you miss something vital. Tools, programs, interventions, games, or whatever you give people will be heard in the paradigm they are in.

We would love to hear from you: How do you recognize when someone is in a learner-centered paradigm? Are there questions they ask, things they do, or ways they talk that give them away?

“A paradigm is a closed set of beliefs, and these underlying beliefs or assumptions set the boundaries for what can be seen from that paradigm.”

KELLY YOUNG



Changing the System

by Neel Pujar

AS AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLER, I loved school and loved learning new things. I would spend hours learning, creating, and imagining how I could make the world a better place. School and I were pretty good friends, but then, on the first day of middle school, I met grades. The fun of learning went by the wayside, so we could focus on more “serious” things. “You are middle schoolers now,” one of my teachers said to us. “I have tons of material to get through, and there is no more time for fun.”

As I grew older, school and I had a tougher time getting along. Instead of feeling inspired, I started to feel restricted. I couldn’t try new things anymore or experiment and fail. When I got to high school, I was treated to new surprises, like SATs, GPAs, ACTs, and APs. By the second month of high school, I was convinced that school was nothing more than a glorified checklist. Memorize these facts, complete these worksheets, take these tests, get these scores, earn these credits, and repeat. I couldn’t really influence how I was learning, let alone what. I didn’t have a voice. I felt like another widget on the assembly line, shuffling from classroom to classroom at the sound of a bell—graded by an arbitrary rubric at every step of the way.

As a student growing up in the traditional education system, I felt like I was living a dual life. I lived one part of my day in the connected collaborative world I call “home” and another part in the increasingly strange and alien environment they called “school.” My school wasn’t reflective of the world I lived in, and I wanted to change that.

It’s December 2012 during my freshman year. School and I were really not getting along. After spending time learning about all the ins and outs of high school, I was ready to make a difference. I asked questions. Lots of questions. I had ideas and shared them with anyone who would listen. I frequently had heated arguments with my teachers, constantly debating with them about what school could be. Many of them agreed that things needed to change, but they understandably preferred that I remain quiet and complete my work. I had a voice, but most people didn’t want to hear it. In the end, I decided to keep quiet. There was no point in trying to influence something that wasn’t ready to be changed. Change has to happen with the right people at the right time, and my high school probably wasn’t the best place to start.

It’s April 18, 2013, and I’m walking into the District Office with my mom and younger brother. I was here to meet Sonya Wrisley, my former middle school principal. At the beginning of the school year, our Superintendent charged all of the schools in our district to change the way they do school, and Sonya was given the opportunity to design and build a new K-8 school from the ground up. I wanted to learn more.

Sonya leads us to her office, and we all sit down at a table. “So, tell me Neel,” she begins, “I want to know what your dream school looks like.” As I talked, she smiled, asked questions, and was genuinely interested in what I was saying. I had a voice, and for the first time, someone was listening. After I was done sharing, she turned around to grab her laptop. “I think you are going to like what I’m going to show you,” she said, turning on the computer.

Scrolling through the architectural renderings of the new school, she shared her vision of a school where kids and teachers aren’t tied to specific classrooms or grades.



Neel Pujar

“As a student growing up in the traditional education system, I felt like I was living a dual life.”

NEEL PUJAR

A school where the schedule would be flexible and wouldn't be governed by bells. A school where learning was personalized and relevant to every learner. It was music to my ears. After an hour of us talking and sharing ideas, I was beyond excited. Our meeting came to a close, and as we walked back to the lobby, she asked me, "So, Neel, would you like to help me build it?" Without hesitation, I replied enthusiastically: "Yes!"

Once I joined the Design39Campus team, I watched as our school was constructed from the ground up, helped with everything from hiring new teachers to designing the day, got to work with organizations and schools around the world, and learned about all the little details that go into creating a school. While everyone on our team passionately believed in the vision for our school, I think we all shared another common belief. In influencing change, our job wasn't to simply impose our idea of what school could be on our community. Rather, we needed to listen, learn, and design solutions with people in mind.

Radically changing people's mindsets is no easy feat, and empathy and clear two-way communication were key throughout the process. With this in mind, we held numerous community feedback sessions, listened to diverse voices and perspectives, and developed collaborative relationships with all of our stakeholders. Despite opposition from some, we kept pushing forward—partnering with more people to join us on our journey to change the way we did school. After a year of designing, planning, and growing, we opened our doors for the first time in August 2014. As we welcomed our first kids on campus, I felt my elementary school excitement in each of their beaming smiles.

Fast forward, it's August 24, 2015. Since Design39Campus opened, I have gone on to represent the students of my district to our school Board. I wanted to bring the amazing things we were able to accomplish at Design39Campus to the rest of our schools. On the day of my first board meeting, I remember thinking, "Here I am, sitting next to the people who have a direct impact on the direction of our district." The meeting was called to order; the District made its report; and the Board President turned to me. My mic was on. I had a voice, and I had an audience. But, as I started to speak, I realized that my job was much more than just speaking my mind at Board Meetings. Just like Sonya did to me three years ago, my first job was to listen.

It's July 2016. Design39Campus has been open for 2 years, and my 1-year term on the Board is complete. Since joining the Board, I have strived to be a listening ear to anyone willing to share their voice. I started my journey to influence change as a kid with a crazy idea. As I progressed through this journey, I realized that change doesn't happen by itself and certainly doesn't happen when we forge our own path by having the loudest voice in the room. Change is a two-way street; it happens when we listen and bring people together. And, I've realized that if we truly want to change an organization as big as the school system, we have to start with people.

CALL FOR LEARNER SUBMISSIONS

Thanks Neel! As you can see, the most powerful advocates for learner-centered education are the learners themselves. So, we'd like your help in sharing learners' stories. We want to provide a space for learners to speak their minds, showcase their projects, and be active participants in the process of education transformation. **Please contact us for learner submission guidelines. (email)**

“Change is a two-way street; it happens when we listen and bring people together.”

NEEL PUJAR

Neel Pujar is an active believer in learner-centered education and currently serves as the Poway Unified School District Student Board Member. In this role, Neel represents the over 35,000 students of the district to the Board of Education, District Leadership, and community. Neel also serves on his district's Superintendent's Student Advisory Committee, Technology Planning and Steering Committee, and attended Education Reimagined's June Pioneer Lab Challenge in Washington, DC. Prior to serving at the district level, Neel has served as a member of his high school's School Site Council and served as a founding team member of Design39Campus. Neel has been recognized as a Junior Achievement Ambassador and continues to passionately advocate to change how we do schools. Neel will be attending the University of California, San Diego in the fall and hopes to pursue his interests in business, education, psychology, human-centered design, and organizational culture.



ReSchool Colorado

Back in 2013, the **Donnell-Kay Foundation** took a stand that the education system was ripe for something new—“bold change in system design.” They launched **ReSchool Colorado** ([link](#)) as a multi-year initiative with the mission “to design and launch an inspirational education system that coordinates people and resources in new, dynamic ways, ensuring an experience that is welcoming, empowering, and world-class.” Since then, ReSchool has brought a collaborative, user-centered design approach to the field to “make the space and cultivate the conditions for a new system of learning to exist in Colorado.” They offer a framework for the future for learning and a new role called the advocate network to help learners and families build the agency they need to know themselves deeply and navigate the dynamic learning ecosystem. Delve into their new website to imagine what learning might look like in a new system and explore the resources in their library to discover what inspired this system-wide reimagination.

A Framework for the Future of Learning ([link](#))

A New Role: The Learner Advocate Network ([link](#))

The Library ([link](#))

Education Evolving

Minnesota-based nonprofit, **Education Evolving (E|E)** ([link](#)), brings to the table decades of experience in making change in public education. Their mission, simply put, is “to turn public education into a self-improving system.” What does this mean to them? It means that the system becomes one in which “better approaches to learning are tried, refined, replicated, and adopted by others,” allowing innovation to gradually spread and improve the entire system. They are tackling this work with three major commitments: 1) Learning must be student-centered; 2) Teachers must lead the learning; and 3) Policy must enable and encourage this transition. In practice, they monitor policy trends; convene individuals around policy innovation; and lead initiatives on a number of levels. Though their work generally takes initial root in Minnesota (where the state can serve as a testing ground), E|E has their eyes on the national scene. In particular, over the past few years, they’ve been working deeply in the realm of teacher empowerment, with initiatives like **Teacher-Powered Schools**. Moreover, E|E hosts an active blog that offers reflections and original thinking about the policy arena and its relationship to learner-centered education and houses a robust library of publications and resources.

The Education Evolving Blog ([link](#))

Teacher-Powered Schools ([link](#))

UPCOMING EVENTS

Mark your calendars! We will be speaking at some and hosting workshops at others. In all cases, pioneers will be front and center! Join us.

ERDI Summer Conference 2016

St. Louis, MO

July 6-12

[Conference Website](#)

AASA Digital Consortium

Chicago, IL

July 27-29

[Conference Website](#)

Big Picture’s Big Bang

Orlando, FL

July 26-29

[Conference Website](#)

iNACOL Blended and Online Learning Symposium

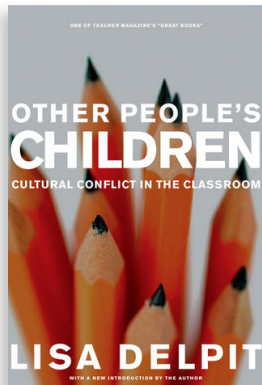
San Antonio, TX

October 25-28

[Conference Website](#)



ON OUR BOOKSHELF



Other People's Children by Lisa Delpit

Recognizing that every child has unique needs, interests, and passions, Lisa Delpit sees an education system that nurtures each child's individuality. In *Other People's Children*, she specifically speaks to what it means to develop a learning environment that recognizes and values the diversity of the cultural backgrounds that our learners bring. Offering guidance for those bridging cultural differences and seeking to infuse their work with cultural competency, she lays out the tools and skills that it will take for every learner to be truly seen and the potential inherent in each learner to be truly realized.



Poke the Box by Seth Godin

"Instigation. Initiative. Go, go, go." In Seth Godin's book, *Poke the Box*, he takes on the question: what is the role of a provocative leader? In most of what we do, we treat the world as if it were static—all the while knowing that is simply not the case. How we see leadership is no different. Treating leadership as a static role stops us from tapping into the full potential of our surroundings. Dynamic, provocative leaders have the power to breathe life into their organizations and move them forward. Godin's *Poke the Box* offers leaders the opportunity to seek transformation in whatever they do.



Freedom to Learn by Will Richardson

What does it mean to have freedom to learn? What does it look like? How does it work? How do teachers fit in? As part of the Solutions to Modern Learning series, Will Richardson asks the reader to redefine "education"—to see it as an opportunity to leverage the new technologies available to give every learner the freedom to thrive. As Richardson shares, "the world that lies ahead" is full of potential if we have the tools and the mindset to create the room for change to occur.

WORTH YOUR TIME

The Complex Lives of Babies

"Babies are the best learning machines in the universe." What if we all started with that assumption? If we actually accept as a fact that all kids are born curious, wondrous, and full of potential, we might just change the world. Check out this review and then watch this new documentary—"The Beginning of Life"—streaming on Netflix!

[Read here](#)

Personalized Learning with Matt & Courtney

Want some company on your drive into work? Tune in with RSU 2 pioneers Matt Shea and Courtney Belolan to laugh, meet new pioneers, and dig into some of the successes and challenges facing those tackling the transition to learner-centered system.

[Listen here](#)

Get the Culture Right: The Most Important New School Factor

When looking to transform your learning environment, where do you start? Again and again, we've heard the same response: culture. See what 20 experts had to say about why culture is such a foundational piece in the puzzle of creating a learning environment. [Read here](#)

“Every human has four endowments—self-awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom... The power to choose, to respond, to change.” —**STEPHEN COVEY**

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