



VISIONARY LEADER MEETING: EXPLORATION OF A 2018 NATIONAL, LEARNER-CENTERED “EVENT”

November 17, 2016

INTENDED OUTCOMES

Explore a national learner-centered education “conference” to accelerate the burgeoning learner-centered education movement. Together we:

- Grounded ourselves in the movement toward learner-centered education and the role a conference might play in that movement.
- Gained meaningful input from a variety of perspectives on a national conference for learner-centered education to be held in 2018.
 - What outcomes would make a conference worth doing?
 - Who would be the ideal attendees?
 - How would you organize the conference?
 - What might it look like?

SUMMARY

Since the publication of Todd Rose’s *The End of Average*, Education Reimagined and the Center for Individual Opportunity—the non-profit launched to expand upon and amplify the burgeoning science of the individual—have been partnering to discover avenues and opportunities to connect Rose’s work with Education Reimagined’s vision for learner-centered education. In November 2016, these two entities gathered visionary leaders from both within and outside of the education sector with the Education Reimagined Advisory Board for a day of brainstorming and exploration. Attendees included learners, education advocates, business leaders, communications experts, learning environment leaders, and playwrights. They came together to explore the opportunity for a 2018 national “conference” to accelerate the learner-centered education movement.

Rich dialogue covered a span of possible desired outcomes, ideal attendees, and design conceptions for this opportunity. The daylong conversation was meant to be just the beginning of a conversation—a time for brainstorming, creating, and thinking outside of the box. It was also meant to elicit any concerns, cautions, or questions about the proposed event and its timeline.

Outcomes and Ideal Attendees

The room began their exploration by considering the intended audience, purpose, and outcomes of such an event. Breaking up into small groups, the visionary leaders jumped into conversation. Their discussions were far-ranging—generating a diversity of opinions, suggestions, and ideas.

As the groups began to work, two important choice points became apparent immediately:

1. *Audience*: The event might be designed to attract and empower those already at work creating learner-centered environments and systems across the country. It would draw in the aligned to find new partners, share

learnings, and stretch people's thinking. Alternatively, this opportunity could serve as a mechanism to share the possibility of the science of the individual and learner-centered education with the public. This route would be designed to break people out of their customary way of thinking, illuminate what could be, and increase demand for transformation.

2. *Structure and Sequence*: This might be a single event—conference, gathering, consortium, or summit. Or, this could be seen as a series of activities and opportunities happening all across the country with a shared vision and purpose. While the group recognized this as a bit of a false dilemma—as these two options could be done in tandem—they acknowledged that the outcomes, design, and preparation would be very different for each. Therefore, they focused their energies for this conversation on only one avenue.

Below is a summary of each group's proposed approach:

1. CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING NATIONAL EFFORTS

Intended Audience: Public

This group proposed generating a series of consciousness-raising activities designed to engage the public in a new conversation about what is possible in education. Recognizing that most conferences fail to generate sustained action, they did not feel that a singular event would yield worthwhile results. Instead, they brainstormed a variety of activities and opportunities for the public to grapple with the idea of average and what it means for learners and their education. These activities would be designed to illuminate the notion of “jaggedness”—highlighting learning environments that are meeting their unique learners' jagged profiles. They imagined opportunities to experience a learner's day through virtual reality and museum exhibits. They also thought about having toolkits and frameworks for pop-up conversations—house parties—to take place around these concepts. The group felt that the best champions and leaders for this work would be the aligned learner-centered pioneers.

2. CREATING SPACES FOR CONNECTION AND INSPIRATION

Intended Audience: Public

Like the proposed consciousness-raising efforts, this small group saw an opportunity to launch thousands of conversations within communities across the country designed to stretch people's thinking and create a mindset shift. However, rather than being focused on education, the group suggested that these conversations serve as avenues for communities to gather and discuss the issues most pressing to them. They would be safe spaces to build relationship and foster connection—evoking the feeling of block parties, family gatherings, or religious revivals. This group also saw the aligned learner-centered pioneers as the champions of this work, suggesting that they serve as hosts and leaders of the conversations. This approach would be a means of experimenting with and testing out engagement strategies for seeding conversations that lead to demand for transformation.

3. FISHBOWL-STYLE CONFERENCE

Intended Audience: Aligned learning environment teams with other learner-centered actors from non-education sectors

The third small group was inspired by both the energy, passion, and sense of urgency expressed by the learners at the meeting and the diversity of stakeholders in the room. They brainstormed a national event designed to bring together teams from a handful of learning environments furthest along in their expression of the vision with other players whose contributions and support would make a significant impact to the movement's success—such as business leaders, state or local policymakers, journalists, and higher education representatives. A key outcome of the event would be for all attendees to recognize the movement's need for connection and collaboration amongst these diverse sectors. Thus, the group emphasized that the learning environment teams would represent the diversity of players needed to create learner-centered environments: learners, educators, administrators, parents, business leaders, community members, policy makers, and school board members.

Utilizing the fishbowl approach, the event would create the space for a shared conversation about how to push the work of the learning environments even further. No one would come with “the answer,” rather they would be partners in generating new avenues and opportunities. The event would intentionally elevate opportunities for those who do not traditionally operate in the education sector to contribute to learners’ pathways.

4. “POLITICAL CONVENTION”

Intended Audience: Aligned pioneers from all sectors already at work to create learner-centered environments and the systems and structures to support them

Focusing exclusively on those already committed to realizing learner-centered education for all children, the final small group offered the metaphor of a “political convention.” Attendees would be able to see themselves as members of a community at work to achieve the same ultimate vision. They would leave inspired, rejuvenated, reinvigorated, and full of hope. It would be a time for them to find new partners and collaborators; share learnings, tools, resources, and best practices; and push each other’s thinking. The group proposed that the experience would embody the five elements of the vision—it would “walk the talk” of learner-centered. They also spoke to the important role that language would play in the event: fostering a shared practitioner lexicon based on the five elements would allow pioneers to more easily and effectively communicate across models. Finally, the group emphasized that this event would be for learner-centered pioneers from all sectors—not just practitioners.

While the ideas and suggestions offered by the four small groups ranged widely in almost every way, the word “conference” was again and again dismissed as failing to capture the breadth, depth, and potential of this event. The participants were eager avoid any of the assumptions often associated with traditional “conferences.”

DESIGN: TAKING THE IDEAS A STEP FURTHER

To give participants the opportunity to go deeper and bigger with their ideas, the rest of the day was spent in two groups going beyond audience and outcomes to think about what an approach might look like in action. While the first half of the day’s brainstorming was fodder for this conversation, both groups began their imagining essentially from scratch—testing out new options, ideas, and possibilities. One group focused on the potential of an actual gathering. The other explored creating a series of activities, events, and opportunities to grow awareness of and excitement for learner-centered education.

1. LEARNER-CENTERED, LEARNER-LED GATHERING

Giving a wide berth to the idea of a traditional “conference,” participants brainstormed a learner-designed and -led gathering meant to give attendees insight into learners’ own experiences of learner-centered education. It would bring learner-centered education to life in a tangible, experiential way. They felt that this focus on the learner’s experience would be of value to both those interested in understanding learner-centered education and those already committed to its realization. It would not only push the thinking of those engaged in learner-centered environments to try new practices and seek new connections but would also inspire newcomers that something more than traditional education was possible and worth fighting for.

The group also emphasized that, while young learners would take the lead throughout much of the event, it was important to remember that we are all learners. Thus, the entire gathering would bring the five elements to life for all attendees—creating space for interactive, out-of-the-box, hands-on, experiential, and engaging experiences for all. This would factor into the event’s venue, location, design, and facilitation.

Finally, the participants in this group shared that diversity of all kinds—race, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, ideology, position, organization, sector—must be front and center for any proposed event or activity. This must be true not only for the event itself but also for those involved in its planning, design, and execution.

2. 90-DAY PROTOTYPE: MINDSET SHIFT

Building on the ideas already generated about consciousness-raising, this group began to sketch out a plan for a rapid-prototype approach to generating community-based conversations across the country hosted and championed by learner-centered leaders of all kinds. The effort would engage those who have not yet had any experience or knowledge of learner-centered education: the general public. However, it is important to note that this engagement would still be about pulling people in to explore an opportunity, not insisting upon one answer.

Incorporating concepts from both *The End of Average* and the vision, the group proposed prototyping conversation kits to help participants see that they all learn and experience the world differently. The goal would be to unleash people from their currently held assumptions about education, learners, and learning—opening them up to a new future for education. They returned to the notion of a family dinner: a comfortable, fun atmosphere where conversations can emerge and flourish. Participants also emphasized that these conversations be inclusive of both young and adult learners—not dominated by either.

This group felt that prototyping was the most promising approach to any next step. They felt urgency to begin these conversations and saw this approach as a means of iteratively learning and exploring what works and what doesn't. However, they also acknowledged that taking this on would require significant resources and time.

Participants closed the day with a discussion about sequencing. They recognized the value of both demand-driving, consciousness-raising activities and an actual gathering and, in fact, saw them as interrelated opportunities. The group was of two minds when it came to the order in which they should take place. However, even here, we were encouraged to not see these as two incongruent approaches.

1. Some felt that it would be important to first gather the aligned—to strengthen the learner-centered community—to equip them with the capacity, confidence, and tools needed to engage the public.
2. Others saw the consciousness-raising activities and events leading to a larger gathering of those both interested in and committed to learner-centered education.

Throughout the meeting, there was palpable excitement and eagerness to explore and discover avenues and vehicles to forward the learner-centered education movement and spread the idea that there is no “average person.” From the incredible diversity of ideas and opinions that emerged, no one doubted that this was a unique moment in time to accelerate a paradigm shift already underway across the country—even if there was not agreement on how best to do so.

Education Reimagined and the Center for Individual Opportunity are thankful to the visionary leaders who joined us for the daylong exploration. We look forward to continuing to gain input on the possibility of a 2018 national, learner-centered event.