

pioneering

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A NOTE FROM EDUCATION REIMAGINED

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Dear Pioneers,

It was wonderful to see so many of you at SXSW EDU last week. The party we co-hosted with our dear friends at Next Generation Learning Challenges and Big Picture Learning was the best we've hosted yet. Every person I reconnected with or met for the first time was doing such incredible learner-centered work.

The collaboration I witnessed over the course of a few short hours furthered my drive to help create more and more spaces for learner-centered pioneers to gather, reenergize, collaborate, and push each other's thinking. Nothing beats the power of in-person, human-to-human connection.

Throughout the evening, I heard questions like: Why do we have curriculums? Why do we cohort kids by age? Why do we break learning into subjects? Why do adults plan what learners will do before they have even met them? These are not the kinds of introspective questions you would hear in most education conversations. And, actually shifting the questions that drive us will be what has us succeed in transforming the system.

This shift in the kinds of questions we are asking results from the mindset or paradigm shift we experience internally. I always distinguish between the mindset or paradigm people are in and the state of their model. Most people think that the more "advanced" or "fully developed" a model is, the more learner-centered they are. In our world, those things are not necessarily correlated. The mindset shift is a switch in how you see the world—specifically how you see the purpose of education, who learners and young people are, and how learning happens. Once that switch is flipped, you can't see the world in the same way.

The paradigm shift is the beginning. The model development is what happens next. Our work is finding those people who are in the same paradigm and, therefore, have these new questions and are in different stages of developing answers to those questions.

I love being part of this movement and getting to be with such amazing and courageous pioneers who are constantly asking new questions and evolving new pathways for young people all over the country!

Enjoy this issue of *Pioneering*!

Kelly Young



CREDITS

Executive Editor:

Kelly Young

Creative Director:

Monica Snellings

Senior Editor:

Demi Edwards

Senior Writer:

Paul Haluszczak

Senior Researcher:

Lindsay Ogawa

Editorial Assistant:

Josh Thilmany

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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.





“Before our first year at Micro, I really couldn’t imagine how all these things that looked great on paper could work in real life. Now I can’t imagine why we do school any other way.” – HIGHLANDS MICRO SCHOOL PARENT

ANNE WINTEMUTE, FOUNDER OF HIGHLANDS MICRO SCHOOL, wants to find out what our children are truly capable of. After exploring the education landscape for her three children, she felt uneasy about the similarities she found between hospital-centered maternity care (her previous work) and school-centered K-12 education—the system was the focus, rather than an individual’s unique needs. Therefore, she took it upon herself to dig in and create something from scratch that matched what researchers already knew to be true.

In 2016, Anne brought her research to life by opening the doors at Highlands. This low tech, mixed-age, no homework, no grades learner-centered environment was ready to show off just how wondrous and capable all of our learners are. Standard curriculums, siloed subjects, and age-based comparisons were never going to show up at Highlands. Instead, a **competency-based** culture of collaboration, community, and curiosity were going to drive the learning for each individual child.

The leaders at Highlands Micro School never asked if kids as young as four and five could develop a sense of **learner agency**. They knew it to be true based on the scientific evidence they had gathered, and they set out to prove the findings. Through **personalized, relevant, and contextualized** learning, they have rewritten the story on what learners are capable of. There is no greater example than the young girl who proclaimed, “Dandelions are the cure for cancer!”

Rather than thinking, “that’s nice, honey,” her scientifically-minded mother and educators challenged her to prove it. And, off she went exploring scientific literature, utilizing her strengths as a writer, and creating a presentation for her community to assess her findings. Oh, by the way, this learner was five years old! And, she’s one of many stories coming out of this **socially embedded** environment where every learner supports one another as they pursue their annual passion projects.

With an assessment framework that all but eliminates the ability to compare, learners aren’t looking to compete with one another. They want to see everyone succeed and grow. Each learner is on a path to develop the **knowledge, skills, and dispositions** that support their present and future yearnings, which are unimpeded by the individual interests of their peers.

As Highlands Micro School continues pushing the needle beyond what we thought was possible in education, they hope to expand their work to the secondary level and remove all barriers to entry—more specifically, eliminating tuition—for the children in their Denver community.

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FACTS & FIGURES

Independent

22 learners, 3 educators

Mixed-Age

Two-Room Schoolhouse

Evidence-Based Learning Environment

Opened in 2016

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A Conversation with Anne Wintemute



ANNE WINTEMUTE

Q. What is your professional background, and how did it lead you to opening Highlands Micro School?

A. I don't have a background in education. That often comes as a surprise to people, and it's something I've always been transparent about. I feel like it's actually been an asset as I've sought to deviate from what schools typically look like and, instead, to pull something together from the evidence of what schools should look like.

My background is all in business. This is my fourth or fifth "business," but it's the first that has married my particular skillset with a real passion. In the past, my businesses were about making money, whereas this one is about making a change.

My philanthropic background was in advocacy for evidence-based maternity care. Education and maternity care may seem like very different things, but there are so many common threads in all of the factors that have led us to a crisis point in both industries. In both, we are facing questions like: "Who are we serving?" and "Are we basing our practice off of the evidence available to us?"

Are we serving the hospital, or are we serving the mother? Are we serving the school, or are we serving the student? Both will say they're serving the individual, but if you sit down and look at the policies, systems, and stakeholders, it becomes very clear that's lip service.

There has been a tremendous amount of research done on both education and maternity care, and this research tends to measure things we would agree with—we all want kids to learn and mothers and babies to live. But, despite the available bodies of evidence, both industries continue to operate in direct contradiction to them. They produce schools and systems that don't honor these kids, and they produce hospitals and policies that are not set up to most benefit the mothers.

When it became time for me to look for schools for my three daughters, I saw all these troubling parallels. That was the chance for me to wrap up another business and begin a school. I had the business background to be able to pull it off and was able to marry it with that passion for change. I dug deeply into the research and asked myself, "What would school look like if it didn't have to look anything like school?" Highlands Micro School was born.

An important thing to note is that I don't think this is the best way to do it. I had to marry it with my business background, so there's a friction between what is marketable, fits within the loose confines of non-public education in Colorado, and is best for the students.

Q. If you didn't have to battle that friction, what might be different in what you've created at Highlands Micro School?

A. If I didn't have to worry about parent anxiety, I would have to do much less work demonstrating on a piece of paper what their kids are learning. We would allow that

to be expressed more naturally. And, I can't blame parents for this. We live in a culture that is continuously concerned about judging parents and how they're doing their job. We have spent a good amount of time honing what that communication with parents looks like. How do we convey the learning that happens on a piece of paper, four times a year? If we were freed from that, we could spend even more time with our kids exploring the things they're interested in.

If we were less constrained, we'd also be able to spend a little less time focusing on weaknesses and let kids run with their strengths. At Highlands, if little Rebecca really struggles with math but is an exceptional writer, we let Rebecca run with the writing and try to keep her on pace with math. But, I think there are plenty of cases where kids could "get by" knowing very little about what they aren't particularly good at so that they have time to focus on these exceptional skills they do have. I think that better reflects what adults look like. If we assumed every subject carried equal weight in our lives, we'd tend to carry quite a few deficits. We're specialists, and we adapt and figure out how to get by with those deficits, rather than letting them hinder us.

If we were less constrained, I wouldn't have had to build the school quite like we did. Even as an independent school, parents still have an expectation of what school should look like. We have to balance what parents need to be comfortable in sending their kids here—what makes this a viable school from a market sense—and how we can still do what's best for these kids.

Q. Assessment is a topic many learner-centered environments are battling. The question is often framed: How do you prove, in a way that can be interpreted from the traditional paradigm, that this type of learning is producing the outcomes we want for our kids? What system have you devised at Highlands Micro School?

A. One of the big questions, as I mentioned, is how do we convey this learning to parents? How do we do it in a way that doesn't negate the value in how we are doing school? If we're doing school in a way that is best for the kids, but we evaluate them in a way that is best for the parents from a traditional sense, then we'd be fools to think our kids wouldn't pick up on that. These kids are deeply invested in their education, and because we—the human race—are all naturally insecure, we want to know how we measure up.

We try to use a system that makes it very difficult to compare from student to student. Even though we're in an environment with a very low competitive nature and a lot of collaboration, when these kids work as hard as they do, they want to know how they measure up. We try to make it as individualized as possible. With that said, our parents still want to specifically know where their child is in relation to grade-level standards.

We just finished a progress report session with our teachers, and I told them to go forward with whatever system they felt was the best way to measure their students. I compiled their progress reports, I looked at them, and I watched the students look over them. I watched the students immediately look at the color-coded charts to see where they were on a color-coded line that was specific to grade level. I wrote all of these things down, drafted a five-page progress report that highlighted the things I could tell were good about the various progress reports—bringing some universality to the process—and built something.

My very first page on this progress report is three paragraphs on how the parent should look at it. In those three paragraphs, it speaks to the anxieties and fears parents have because they went through traditional schooling environments. I try to

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reinforce that we focus on the growth of the student, regardless of where they are in relation to traditional grade-level standards.

The second page is a Featured Growth sheet, which is similar to the work coming out of the Mastery Transcript Consortium without the credits attached to it. Each kid has three things their teacher has seen exceptional growth in, whether it's advancing a weakness or a strength.

The next section is more academically focused, like reading performance and what we expect to see next. These are not grade-aligned—"this is where we've seen a lot of growth, and this is what we expect to see next" is the only way we speak about where the kids currently are.

Buried in this report is "relative to grade level, in conventional terms, where is this student?" If we don't tell parents, they'll ask. And, if we make them ask, we've given them an opportunity to become anxious. In very small print, here's where they are in reading, writing, math, etc.

I've actually considered putting this in an entirely separate envelope and saying, "If you're curious about where your kid measures up respective to grade-level standards, here it is, but we would strongly encourage you don't show this to your child." And, here's the thing, I think it's just as damaging to show a kid he or she is beyond their grade level as it is to show them they are behind. I think showing a kid who is "on target" is damaging. Because you have taken away everything that is "them" about their learning. You have reduced them to a standard.

We also have a habits section that every kid self-assesses on. It takes a look at their work and social habits and is something we focus quite a bit of our attention on, so it gets an entire page in this report. The environment here is so independent that it's critically important that our kids are learning what those skills are. For a kindergarten-aged student, we have them ask: What does it mean to choose your best thought? What does it mean to choose people to work with who won't distract you from your work? What does it mean to take care of your body and use the restroom when you need to? For a student who's 11 and is about to leave our school, they should be fully employing and demonstrating leadership on a variety of workplace skills.

Q. With the dynamic set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions you are looking to develop and evolve in your learners, how does this play out at Highlands Micro School?

A. We do passion projects here, spending almost the entire last third of the year on them. Last year, we had a student who really capitalized on marrying those habits of what we look to develop with her academic pursuits.

She became interested in how the neural networking in the brain predicted how people experienced emotions. One would expect, based on the topic of exploration, that she would produce work that was heavy on science jargon, but it wasn't. It was thorough in terms of the information presented, but it was presented visually. This first grader is an exceptional artist who pours her heart into her art. She made the most amazing medical illustrations of the processes going on in the brain that cause the experience of emotions. It was absolutely outstanding.

And, I can't imagine another learning environment where a first grader would get to spend so much time detailing these scientific drawings, bringing out the information with so many fantastic colors, scrapping the first attempt, and coming back to do

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it better—holding such a high standard for the work she was producing. We see this in all of our kids. They will edit, revise, and edit again. They compile all of the skills they've been working on throughout the year and combine them in this final project.

Q. Given that Highlands Micro School currently serves elementary-aged learners, what does that transition look like for parents who are deciding where to send their kids next?

A. This is a dynamic issue and one that keeps me up at night. Honestly, I'd rather a student go from a learner-centered school to a school-centered school than to have spent all of their years in a school-centered school. I think their better sense of self—understanding who they are, what they want, how they get what they want, their independence and inquisition, their ability to stand up and ask difficult questions, their lack of anxiety when called to answer a difficult question—will allow them to maintain it regardless of where they go next.

I think the benefit of being in a pro-social, low competition environment with a tremendous amount of agency and independence will only set you up better for junior high. And, we need to be honest with ourselves in that it's a very difficult time—junior high—no matter what.

While I can picture our students experiencing a transition to a traditional middle school in the same way a student from a traditional elementary school would, we need a great option for our graduating fifth grade students to stay in this model of learning. That's why I need \$2.5 million to buy the property next door so we can build our middle and high school.

I would also like to be a need-blind school. Something that has never sat comfortably with me is that you need \$12,000 to send your kid here. We all know these kids stand to benefit from this model of schooling, but the vast majority of kids—those who can't afford to go here—stand to benefit the most.

Q. What's on the horizon for Highlands Micro School?

A. We'll continue to get better. We don't have any major holes anywhere. We have happy parents and happy students. But, we always feel like there are ways to better our work. The first year was simply, "Can we do it? Yay, we did it!" The second year was about putting the proper systems in place so that this is replicable. We want to be able to provide resources to other organizations and schools that want to do something similar. Putting those kinds of systems and policies on paper without losing the flexibility is really critical. That can be something hard to articulate—how do you do it?—without producing a bunch of clones.

Moreover, I have a fear of our model and work being transplanted into a "school-centered" environment and being declared unworkable. I think about it this way: What if we all decided that the best environment for kids was to just lay in the grass. Let's all imagine this lush green grass. Then, traditional schools come along and say, "We can do that." They rip up that grass and stick it inside their building, using it as their carpet. Then, they realize the grass is starting to die—it's very difficult to keep alive—and nobody knows what to do. They haven't even realized they took the grass out of the natural habitat it needs to grow. They've eliminated the sunshine, rain, and pollinators, and now their grass is dead. They're going to say, this doesn't work, and they'll rip out the grass and put in Astroturf. They'll look out into the world and say, "Look! We have green grass."

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In an attempt to apply great policies and practices, they've removed themselves so far from what was originally good about them, they don't work. If you want to take an alternative learning environment and then measure it by the same metrics this artificial environment is using, absolutely, your grass is going to die. Given this, I want us to be very careful as we share more about our model and partner with those interesting in understanding how it works.

Finally, from a directorship standpoint, where I stand, our biggest next step is to delve into the feasibility of developing this out so it can go beyond fifth grade. That's a big thing on the horizon.



Anne Wintemute is the Founder and Director of Highlands Micro School. Before opening an evidence-based elementary school, Anne worked in business start-ups and advocated for evidence-based maternity care. Anne lives in Denver, CO with her husband and three daughters.

The Paradigm Shift: Listening for a New World

by Josh Thilmany

At Education Reimagined, we are collecting stories from education stakeholders who have experienced an “ah-ha” moment when the paradigm shift from school-centered to learner-centered education happened for them. Here is the story from our very own Josh Thilmany.

While my peers beelined through “the Diag”—the University of Michigan’s central quad—checking their schedules and mentally mapping the path they would follow for the next four months, I stood along a dirt road halfway around the world, embarking on my own adventure into the unknown of New Zealand. With my fist closed and my thumb defiantly raised against pellets of rain that had been falling for nearly an hour, I wondered if I was really any better off than they were.

A silver hatchback with a long, narrow New Zealand license plate flashed its headlights as it crested the hill to my right. Finally. The driver pulled onto the shoulder and rolled down his window as I marched to the side of the car. “Where you headed?” he asked. Somewhere dry was what I wanted to say. “North, to Waimauku,” I replied. “Hop in, and throw your bag in the boot,” he said as he gestured toward the back of the car. I wrestled my dripping, fifty pound pack into the trunk and slid into the passenger seat.

The driver’s name was Nate, a slender man with sharp cheekbones and midnight eyes that looked as though they had seen lifetimes. As we drove through the hills of the North Island, where sheep outnumber humans by the hundreds to one, Nate and I shared stories. I learned that he was a Zimbabwean filmmaker and documentarian who had fled from South Africa to New Zealand after a price was placed on his head. Who I was, though, was still something I was trying to figure out.

Nate was the first of countless strangers with whom I hitchhiked over the course of what would have otherwise been my first semester of sophomore year at the University of Michigan—a time during which I traded my textbooks for a foreign work visa and my backpack for, well, a much bigger backpack.



JOSH THILMANY

What had led me to be the rain-soaked, unkempt backpacker climbing into Nate’s car was this riling sense that I wasn’t actually going anywhere in my life. This was a feeling that had been stewing in me for as long as I could remember, but it was something that would take me years to realize and articulate. The knowledge and skills I had been diligently collecting like Monopoly properties for the past 15 years had never been applicable. I had been living in a world of concepts and theories, and wasn’t all of this supposed to help me engage with the world, rather than sit back and study it? So, I decided I would take my education into my own hands, and I purchased a one-way plane ticket to New Zealand, determined not to return until I found what I was looking for.

THE VERDICT

The story I didn’t quite know how to articulate to Nate begins in middle school on a set of folding chairs perched outside of the Language Arts classroom.

There, Ms. Schramm sat clutching the spiral bound book every teacher seemed to possess, the one resembling an accountant’s ledger, with students’ names and grades stacked beside one another, ready for quick comparison. On this particular day, we were finding out our high school class placements.

I shouldn’t have been surprised when she told me I would be in all “regular” classes. After all, every report card lamented the same observation: Josh shows potential but is too easily distracted by his friends. It was a fair observation, but I didn’t see it as problematic. In fact, I saw it as fundamental. I enjoyed talking—not for the fun of it but for the life of it. How were we supposed to engage with anything if we couldn’t have a conversation about it, if it was just being projected at us from the front of the room? How were we supposed to ask questions and see other points of view? How were we supposed to learn?

This placement felt different, though. It felt like a verdict. This was high school—the big leagues. Suddenly, I wondered if I hadn’t been taking things seriously enough. I didn’t want to be average. If I wanted to succeed, I needed to be in honors classes; I needed to be competitive; I needed to be better.

Frankly, I don’t think I ever really knew what I meant by “success.” Perhaps it was admission to a good (read: highly ranked) college or a good (read: high-paying) job afterwards, but those are the easy answers. In retrospect, this obstructive notion of success as something I needed to seek beyond myself blinded me to the possibility that it was something I could create within.

BELATED

What I was experiencing is something my dear friend and poet extraordinaire, Lisa Hiton, describes as a sense of belatedness to one’s life. I was overcome by the sensation that I was late, that I had been doing the “wrong” thing and had suddenly recognized the “right” thing. Why hadn’t I realized this sooner? My life became about making up for the time I thought I had lost, the time I had wasted.

By the end of my freshman year of high school I had been promoted to all honors classes, and all AP’s by my senior year. I was the Chair of the Student Advisory Board, an editor for the school newspaper, a tutor to underclassmen, and a varsity athlete. I would arrive at school by 5:30 a.m. for morning swim practice, go to class, hit the water again in the afternoon, and leave school at 6:00 p.m.—knowing full and well I’d be burning the midnight oil to catch up on reading or write an essay that was due the following day. “I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” I would say half jokingly, half proudly to

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friends in the newsroom as we commiserated about schedules and assignments. Not even a stress-induced stomach ulcer during my junior year was enough to convince me I was pushing myself too hard.

My life felt less like a series of decisions and more like a prescription. Sure, I enjoyed swimming; I felt expressed writing for the newspaper; I was learning in my classes; but the standard to which I was holding myself was not my own. In fact, the standard wasn't even written anywhere, but it was widely understood. There was a set of expectations—a potent amalgamation of parental pressure, community comparison, media messaging, and good old fashioned, zero-sum competition—that my peers and I experienced like a second coming of age. It wasn't a choice to live this way; it was a necessity.

My parents had moved to the affluent, North Chicago suburb in which I grew up not for the home in which we would reside or the neighbors on the other side of the fence, but for the schools which I would have the privilege of attending. My education looked much different than theirs, and we had no shared language to talk about my school experience. Standardization was the name of the game, and from kindergarten through 12th grade, a battery of tests and ambiguous scores were the only measure by which they could get a sense of my progress.

Dinner table conversation, while there was still time for it, was more about how I was scoring and performing than how I was learning. And, as I grew older, our ability to have conversations about school grew threadbare. When I was in third grade, they nearly had a collective heart attack when I revealed I hadn't done my homework one night. We all worked diligently around the kitchen table until what felt like the wee hours of the morning, making sure it was complete and making me promise it would never happen again. In hindsight, their reaction was less anger or disappointment than it was fear of me falling behind in a game in which losing was not an option.

By middle school, the content was beyond their ability to offer me help, and by high school, I felt more like their roommate than their son. Even my grades were difficult for them to understand—it took some convincing in high school that a 5 on an AP test wasn't a bad thing. Yes, Mom and Dad, I get college credit for it, too.

Looking back, I know their intentions were well placed. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is, I was surrendered. I was surrendered to a system that promised to equip me for success and allow me to understand the world in new and dynamic ways, even if it meant my own parents couldn't join me in it.

By virtue of the zip code in which they chose to purchase a home, I was not only granted access to opportunities and resources unimaginable in public districts on the other side of the city, but I was also given something a majority of American children today lack (often because of their own zip code and the color of their skin): the sense that the system is on my side.

This is but a microcosm of the great tragedies our traditional model of education evokes. That we have created a system in which parents must surrender their children in hopes of an undefined “better life,” rather than one in which they can learn, engage, and grow with them, is a displacement of our very humanity. Do we really want an education system that closes parents off from their child's learning after age 11? Don't our parents have more to provide?

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ENTROPY ENSUES

I cringe when I think about the first resource I consulted when I began looking at colleges to attend—the *U.S. News and World Report* university rankings. While scanning the list, I did the the mental math of my application materials. I compared my GPA, ACT, SAT, and AP scores, factored in extracurriculars and volunteer work, and added the innumerate variables like letters of recommendation, personal statements, and my school's existing relationship with some of these institutions. After all of this lopsided arithmetic, I drew a line under #25 and declared nothing below it would be acceptable.

I ended up applying to a total of 15 schools—three safeties, four targets, and eight reaches. Aside from their proximity in ranking, there was very little connecting them. Some were urban, while others had more traditional campuses. Some had enrollments over 40,000 and some under 10,000.

In this process, I became poignantly present to the fact that the 13-year-old boy who sat beside Ms. Schramm, clad in his pink Abercrombie polo and spiked hair, knew more about who he was, what he wanted, and how he learned than the 17-year-old honors student I prided myself on being.

The first time I visited the University of Michigan was like trying on someone else's glasses—I'm sure it worked for some people, but it gave me a headache. It was large and gray, red cups littered the lawns, and the size of my tour group was overwhelmingly the same size as my graduating high school class. I surprised even myself when I decided to enroll there. My life up until that point had been more about option than choice: swimming or gymnastics; newspaper or choir; AP English or AP History. There existed an implicit set of requisites, within which lived the impression of choice. So, where I chose to go to school didn't seem to matter if I was going to be checking the same boxes regardless.

My freshman year was a glorious disaster. On paper, I was doing well. I was succeeding academically; I was involved in clubs and scholarship programs; I was competing as a Division 1 rower. But, doing well wasn't the issue, and I had a knack for mistaking proficiency or talent for passion. Internally, I was writhing in the uncertainty of it all. Academically, I switched my course of study three times in just two semesters, from pre-med to communications to computer science. Socially, I withdrew. I resigned myself to believing frat parties were the only way to "go out," so instead I would pretend to be sleeping when my roommate returned from class, ensuring he would leave his things and quickly depart, leaving me to wallow and binge *How I Met Your Mother*.

By the time the year ended, I couldn't imagine ever going back. I was confident that Michigan simply was not the right place for me. Within a week of returning home to Chicago, I found myself in a recruiter's office, ready to enlist in the United States Navy. I needed a way out—of this place, of my mind, of this life—and I needed it now.

As I sat amongst the wood panels of the recruitment office, clutching a pamphlet depicting ethnically ambiguous women and men in uniform, I listened to a gunnery sergeant in the office at the end of the hall barking something about physical fitness test scores. Whoever was on the receiving end was surely covered in spit.

I knew I was in the wrong place, and I was grasping for an answer that would absolve me of asking the questions I needed to be asking: What do I want from my life? Who and how do I want to be in this world? What do I want to create?

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A DIFFERENT KIND OF CLASSROOM

Two months later, I stepped off the plane in Auckland, New Zealand with no idea of where I would go, work, or even sleep that night. And for the next five months, I let one experience inform the next as I traversed the country's islands, north to south. My first job on a biodynamic vineyard led to my next job assisting a local beekeeper, which led to working as a farm hand, which led to landscaping and forestry. I quickly realized that none of this work was independent from the rest. There was an inherent connection between the people and the land, the resources they gathered from it, and the care they put back into it. It wasn't just about learning how to do the job but also learning why the job needed to be done and the impact it would have on the community and ecosystem around it.

An organization called World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) allowed me to do this work in good company. Essentially a work-stay program, WWOOF-ing allows travelers to connect with local families and receive food and lodging in exchange for labor. For weeks at a time, I was welcomed into homes eager to share with me their culture and traditions. I learned to cook using local ingredients and tend to land that had been providing for families for generations. I learned the significance of the Maori haka and the spartan rules of rugby. Most importantly, though, I learned to listen differently.

Listening was no longer an individual act of making things smaller, of selectively searching for relevant information and discarding the rest, or even of finding answers. Listening was a collective act of sharing and making things bigger—our wonders and curiosities, our insights and connections, ourselves.

A NEW WORLD OF POSSIBILITY

I returned to Michigan ready to not only ask myself new questions but also listen differently to the answers. What am I curious about, and how can I explore it further? How do I learn best, and how can I create those conditions for myself?

I found my place in the Residential College, a living-learning community of creative scholars who balanced independent study with interdisciplinary projects. And, I found within it a group of peers and professors who supported the way I thought and engaged with the world. I created for myself a course of study that revealed and made accessible an exploration of the interconnectedness of things I had felt in New Zealand. From Shakespeare in Rome and Renaissance Poetry to Symphonic Musicology and Architectural Drawing, I was pushing the boundaries of my thinking and finding new ways to bring that thinking into the world.

It would be a few more years before I would know to distinguish what I was experiencing as a paradigm shift. And, I would continue traveling to new places and trying on different ideas of what my life could look like. But, I was learning to be differently in the world. I was learning to embrace my wandering spirit not as a means of escape but as a way of creating deeper connections in my life. The sense of belatedness that had been lingering for me and infiltrating my thoughts, feelings, and relationships was gone. In letting go of the person I thought I needed to be, a whole new world became available, a world in which the questions could matter more than the answers and my curiosity could be my connection to the people, places, and ideas that made that world worth living in.



Josh Thilmany is a Chicago native, an avid traveler, and a relentless advocate for learner-centered education. A proud graduate of the University of Michigan, he received a B.A. degree with distinction in Arts & Ideas in the Humanities and Creative Writing & Literature, with a Specialized Study in Developmental Psychology. While there, he engaged with learners in environments across the academic spectrum, in both public and private settings. After graduating, he worked as a Scholar Advocate in the emerging field of educational technology while contributing to research at the National Institutes of Health. He is now a Research and Outreach Fellow with Education Reimagined.



Tinkergarten

What if you could turn a play date into a community-enriching experience that leaves adults and children alike excited to enhance their “empathy, collaboration, creativity, persistence and problem solving?” [Tinkergarten](#) has designed an experience with that exact thought in mind. Serving children from 18-months to 8-years-old, this national movement sees a future where “all families will have access to high quality early learning, so their children will be ready to thrive, ready to learn and ready for anything.” While it could appear as just another day of fun in the sun for the kids, the parents will be informed of how each activity is supporting the growth and development of their children. Better yet, Tinkergarten provides an entire library of DIY activities that target a variety of developmental competencies any adult can reproduce for their and their neighbor’s children. Discover how these open-walled opportunities can help engage the young learners in your community.

DIY Activities ([link](#))

Classes in Your Area ([link](#))

Become a Leader ([link](#))

Visioning Toolkit: Laying the Groundwork for a Community-Wide Vision for Personalized Learning

Reimagining what’s possible in education isn’t an activity that takes place behind closed doors in a district’s central office. Rather, it’s a visioning process that welcomes every member of the community to the table. The more voices included, the more accountability and ownership everyone will begin to take in the growth and development of the community’s children. There is no doubt gathering all of these voices is a difficult task. There is no perfect time or place to host conversations everyone can attend. And, there isn’t one “host” who can organize it all. So, how can you make it all work? The leaders at KnowledgeWorks, experienced in working through the ins-and-outs of this very question, have released a brand new Visioning Toolkit designed with you, a learner-centered pioneer, in mind. Explore this treasure-trove of insight, and discover how you might lay the groundwork for a community-wide vision for transforming education.

Download the Toolkit ([link](#))

UPCOMING EVENTS

ASU + GSV SUMMIT

San Diego, CA

Apr. 16-18

[Summit Website](#)

FUTURENOW! CONFERENCE

San Diego, CA

Apr. 27-28

[Conference Website](#)

EDUCATION ELEMENTS PERSONALIZED LEARNING SUMMIT 2018

San Francisco, CA

May 2-4

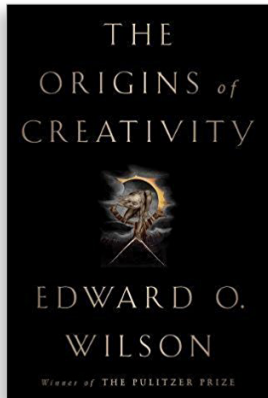
[Summit Website](#)

OPPORTUNITY BOARD

Lindsay Unified School District

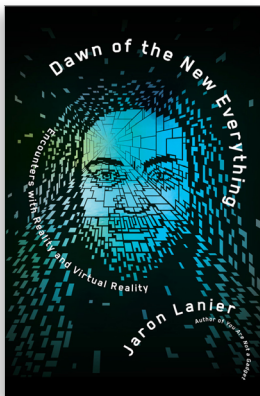
is looking for a High School Principal to start in the 2018/2019 academic year. The deadline is quickly approaching (March 19, 2018), so be sure to check out the details today. Learn more [here](#).

Teton Science Schools is seeking a Vice President of Educator Development. In this role, you will lead the team to develop place-based educators increasing student engagement, learner outcomes, and community impact. Learn more [here](#).



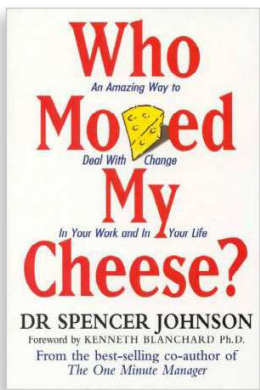
The Origins of Creativity by Edward O. Wilson

Learner-centered pioneers recognize the creativity inherent in all learners. Edward O. Wilson, author of *The Origins of Creativity*, wants to take you on an exploration of this inherently human characteristic—to a degree you’ve never seen before. Starting over 100,000 years ago, the Pulitzer Prize winning author invites readers on a journey through the lenses of science and the arts, showing how both have grown and thrived thanks to the creative minds of mankind. Take a look at creativity from a whole new light, and see how it shows up in your learners (colleagues, friends, and family).



Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality by Jaron Lanier

How should we relate to a future where virtual reality is a technology that exists at the core of our everyday lives? Who better to answer this question than the father of VR himself, Jaron Lanier? In Lanier’s book, *Dawn of the New Everything*, he guides the reader through the story of his life and how virtual reality can bring new and positive possibilities to everyone’s future. A man celebrated for his identity as a lifelong learner, Lanier might be welcome company as you select your next book.



Who Moved My Cheese?: An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life by Spencer Johnson

Even if you see yourself as someone who leads change and transformation, the unpredictable future can make you yearn for a little more control. When these thoughts creep in, it helps to have a small reminder there to refocus your energy on the task at hand. Dr. Spencer Johnson has just the thing. In his hit book, *Who Moved My Cheese?*, Dr. Johnson provides a light-hearted parable to explain some of the greatest lessons he’s learned throughout his career in the medical field. Maybe this is the lesson you’ve been looking for.

WORTH YOUR TIME

The Misguided Drive to Measure ‘Learning Outcomes’

In our data-obsessed age, methodologies to measure anything and everything are a dime a dozen. But, what direction are they all taking us? One assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina answers. [Read here](#)

The Willpower Gap — Misinterpreting Student Agency

In the throes of advocating for learner agency comes a call for reflection. If a learner owns the “doing” without the freedom to pick the direction in which he does “it,” has he developed any ability to own his future, independent learning journeys? [Read here](#)

Does every teacher need a coach?

Parallels of “the system is greater than the individual” mentality can be seen across the education industry and beyond. The educator coaching business is the most recent field to reconsider scaling for the average individual in favor of meeting the needs of the individual. [Read here](#)

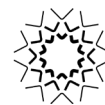
“You may have to fight a battle
more than once to win it.”

— **MARGARET THATCHER**

Read past issues of
PIONEERING: A LEARNER-CENTERED PUBLICATION
www.education-reimagined.org/pioneering



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