

Learners at the center.

The background of the page is white with several dark teal diagonal lines and five colored circles (cyan, red, purple, teal, orange) scattered across it. The text is centered in the middle of the page.

# Practitioner's Lexicon

What is meant by key terminology.

**Updated: January 2018** • This document was originally generated by the 28 signatories of “A Transformational Vision for Education in the US” and has been updated by the Pioneer Lab Community. *The Practitioner’s Lexicon* is a living document and will continue to be updated by pioneers as learnings emerge from the field.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a technical document that clarifies key terms found in “A Transformational Vision for Education in the US,” a vision for learner-centered education which was crafted by a group of ideologically diverse education stakeholders. In the vision, they describe the nature of the Learner-Centered Paradigm:

*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” (2015). Education Reimagined. Convergence Center for Policy Resolution. page 5)

This lexicon is a response to the near universal request from pioneering learner-centered practitioners seeking to communicate and share learnings across various learner-centered models and across various disciplines and perspectives. They have asked that key terms be distinguished at a level of depth that will enable a shared practitioner language and that will provide a “Rosetta Stone” for translating the myriad of conversations going on across the nation and around the world.

This lexicon provides practitioners with access to a common language for acting on and sharing the future described in the vision document. What follows is a term-by-term discussion that begins with the Learner-Centered Paradigm itself and continues with each element of the learner-centered model:

- **Learner-Centered Paradigm**
- **Learner Agency**
- **Socially Embedded**
- **Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized**
- **Open-Walled**
- **Competency-Based**

Please keep in mind that, in the absence of the Learner-Centered Paradigm, any of the elements become a mere adjustment to the current model. And, that the elements should be understood to be inter-related in practice, with every element empowering and advancing what is possible for the other elements.

Finally, please be clear that what follows is not a rigid blueprint or “how-to” specifications. Rather than providing definitions that describe “typical” or “average”—or even “ideal”—examples of each element, what follows are distinctions that clarify the full domain of possible examples represented by each term. That is to say, what follows is a discussion that creates boundaries between those examples which can be associated with each term and those which cannot be so associated.

## DISTINGUISHING A “LEARNER-CENTERED PARADIGM FOR EDUCATION”

Let’s begin by stating specifically what we mean when we use the term “paradigm.” In this discussion, we use the term “paradigm” to refer to a coherent and closed set of background assumptions that constitute one’s worldview and, therefore, one’s frame of reference within that worldview. Sometimes called a person’s “mental model” or “mindset,” our paradigm for any aspect of the world contextualizes that aspect and provides our way of making meaning out of what we encounter.

We are interested here in the coherent and closed set of background assumptions regarding what education is and ought to be, what makes for an effective education today, and how one should go about providing education to broad populations of learners. And, more specifically, we are interested here in that particular paradigm for education we refer to as “Learner-Centered.” In a nutshell, the Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education has as its fundamental mindset that education systems must respond uniquely to each unique, individual learner—to who they are and to what they need at any point in time.

Before going any further in clarifying this paradigm, we will first head off a few common misconceptions by briefly discussing what the Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education is **not**:

1. ***The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about caring more for the learners.*** Every educator and every parent cares deeply for learners regardless of which Paradigm is operating in the background of their thinking.
2. ***The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about letting learners do whatever they feel like doing, whenever they feel like doing it.*** While the Learner’s role in co-creating their education will be critical, this is not about giving up on achieving society’s standards for what qualifies as a good education.
3. ***Finally, the Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about individual learners working in isolation without supportive learning communities.*** In the Learner-Centered Paradigm, learning as a social process is recognized, valued, and leveraged.

What, then, is the Learner-Centered Paradigm? As with any Paradigm, the Learner-Centered Paradigm is constituted by a coherent and closed set of background assumptions. The Learner-Centered Paradigm begins with several assumptions about the learners themselves. First, each learner is seen as being unique in meaningful ways. They have unique backgrounds, circumstances, and starting points. They have unique strengths and challenges. And, they have unique interests and aspirations. All of these unique attributes call for unique responses from the learning system in which they are participating. Second, each learner is seen as having unbounded potential—potential that will unfold at its own pace and in its own way. Every single learner is a wonder to behold. And, finally, each learner is seen as having an innate desire to learn. The job of the education system is to unleash that innate desire to learn.

Building on this view of each unique learner, the Learner-Centered Paradigm includes a set of background assumptions regarding the education system in which the learner participates. The first is that the central work performed in the education system is learning itself and the central worker is the learner. Everyone else involved in the system is there to enable that learning and those learners. The teachers and administrators, the parents and oversight bodies, the tool providers and publishers are all there to enable and empower each individual learner. It follows that the education system must then be structured to respond to each unique learner. Learner-centered education systems must be fundamentally built to adapt to the needs, interests, circumstances, and aspirations of the learners, as each moves through the system at their own pace and in their own way.

Finally, the Learner-Centered Paradigm includes assumptions about what learning is and can be. Learning is understood to be the exercising of our innate capacity to wonder, discover, and make sense of the world around us. It is a natural process going on all the time, beginning when we are born and continuing throughout our lifetimes. Learning can and does happen anywhere and at any time, not merely in a primary learning environment during prescribed hours. In this paradigm, the most critical form of learning is learning how to learn. And, our capacity to learn can be enabled by instruction but also through such activities as observation, experience, experimentation, and play. There are a myriad of learning modalities, and each individual learner may benefit from different ones depending on who they are, what they are learning, and how they learn best. Finally, it is assumed that learning not only encompasses the accumulation of knowledge but also the development of the skills needed to apply that knowledge and the dispositions needed to do so in real-world situations. We know learning has happened when we are able to interact with the world in new and successful ways.

The Learner-Centered Paradigm begins with assumptions about the uniqueness of each learner, continues with assumptions regarding the need for education systems to respond effectively to that uniqueness, and ends with assumptions about what learning is and can be. This Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education is quite different from the dominant paradigm for education today, which we refer to as the “School-Centered Paradigm for Education” and which has its origins in the Industrial Revolution. In the remainder of this discussion, we will delineate the paradigm shift from School-Centered to Learner-Centered.

### **Paradigm Shift: From School-Centered to Learner-Centered**

When people first hear the term Learner-Centered, they may initially think, “How else can someone look at the challenge of education? Doesn’t everyone take a learner-centered perspective?” In our way of distinguishing “Learner-Centered,” the answer to that question is “no.” Of course, everyone involved in education cares deeply about the learner and learner outcomes, but that does not make them Learner-Centered. The most common perspective used for impacting learner outcomes is a School-Centered one, not one that is Learner-Centered. Learner-Centered thinking overturns the School-Centered assumptions about learners, learning systems, and learning itself. Because these assumptions are generally left unspoken in the background, they can be difficult to see at first. And, because School-Centered assumptions are so pervasive, it can be startling the first time someone escapes them.

The School-Centered Paradigm for Education was developed at a time when the challenge in society was to make education universally available. It was a time when the Industrial Revolution was taking hold and mass production—with its efficient assembly lines—was producing rapid growth in one industry after another. Applying this industrial approach to make education universally available, we created standardized schools that looked a lot like factories and a standard progression from kindergarten through 12th grade that looked a lot like assembly lines. Thus, in this perspective, learners are seen as unfinished works in progress, as vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. The education system is designed to move the learner at an average pace through a standard curriculum. Learning is assumed to be about providing groups of learners at the same age with a standard set of knowledge deemed appropriate for that age. For nearly 150 years, this School-Centered Paradigm for Education has dominated our thinking. It seems normal.

What happens when we seek to improve education? In a School-Centered Paradigm, the assumption is that education happens in a school. So, when we improve the school, we improve education. The basic question from a School-Centered perspective is: What will make this school more efficient and effective in the task of schooling our young people? Follow-up questions include: How should a school be organized? How do we ensure this school is meeting its goals? How come some schools do better than others? In a School-Centered Paradigm, the School is placed at the center of our thinking, without considering any alternative.

By contrast, in a Learner-Centered Paradigm, the unique learner is placed at the center. When you put the learner at the center of every decision, you are in a different world. The basic

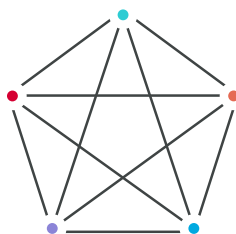
question from a Learner-Centered perspective is: Who is this learner, and what will support each learner in the task of their learning? Follow-up questions include: How do we ensure that each learner can meet their goals? How do we create a system that allows each particular learner to learn in the way they learn best? How come some learners are moving at a different pace than others? Does this system allow each learner to learn at an appropriate pace for them at each point along their journey? Are learners able to group and re-group, so they are appropriately challenged and engaged?

The Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education asks us to transform our way of thinking about education. It asks us to see learners and learning in a new way. It requires us to make a shift from School-Centered thinking to Learner-Centered thinking. The following chart outlines this shift.

FROM: SCHOOL-CENTERED	TO: LEARNER-CENTERED
Learning happens in schools.	Learning happens in learners.
Education is done to the learner.	Education is done by (and with) the learner.
Learners are known by how they compare to their class averages on standardized tests.	Learners are known as individuals—each with their own unique strengths, interests, and goals.
Learners must be compelled to perform.	Learners want to learn.
Focus on having the most effective teaching.	Focus on having the most effective learning.
The learner adapts to the standardized system.	The system adapts to the unique learner.
Effectiveness is achieved through standardization.	Effectiveness is achieved through customization.
All learners follow standard paths at standard paces and demonstrate mastery in standardized ways.	Each learner moves on their own path at an appropriate and adaptable pace and can demonstrate proficiency in many ways.
Teach to the average learner and manage exceptions as problems.	Every learner is exceptional. The uniqueness of learners is not a problem but, instead, something to build on.

Looking at education through a Learner-Centered Paradigm brings us to a very different place when it comes to designing models for education. No longer will we think in terms of factories and assembly lines. The result of a Learner-Centered focus will invariably be an entirely different way to educate our children and an entirely different model for ensuring that a great education is made available to each learner. We will design models with the learner at the center of our thinking.

What do such models look like when fully expressed? They are constituted by the following five elements, each of which is distinguished in the remainder of this document:



- Learner Agency**
- Socially Embedded**
- Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized**
- Open-Walled**
- Competency-Based**

When these components are present and fully expressed, they interact to create a learner-centered experience for each learner. Each learner is prepared for the future of their lives—for a life of learning and being productive participants in their communities and in the economy.

## DISTINGUISHING “LEARNER AGENCY”

What do we mean when we say “Learner Agency?” Let’s start with the term “agency.” In his book, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Chris Barker defines “agency” in this way: “... agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.” To act independently in this sense, a person must have free choice available in areas that really matter to that person, and they must also have the wherewithal to exercise that choice effectively. When these conditions are met, the person may be said to have “agency” in the matter at hand.

What does it mean for a learner to have agency? Learner Agency involves the availability of meaningful choice and the learner’s wherewithal for exercising that choice, such that they develop into responsible owners of their own learning.

Of course, every learning environment can be said to include some degree of choice in that learners are always making choices—sometimes big choices and sometimes small choices. Even in the most restrictive learning settings, a learner has the option of accepting or resisting what has been assigned and the decision of how hard they will apply themselves to any particular task. However, we use the term Learner Agency to be more than the mere presence of choice. Rather we mean the methodological development of both the capacity and the freedom of learners to exercise choice regarding what is to be learned and to co-create how that learning is to take place.

In this vision, we use the term Learner Agency to refer to a key element of the learning model itself. In such models, learners gain more and more choice and control over their learning pathways and learning experiences while working with adult education professionals at each step. These professionals ensure that there is a methodological introduction of more and more learner agency as appropriate for each learner, along with: the development of the wherewithal to both shape and make choices effectively; the cultivation of responsibility for the consequences of one’s choices and actions; and the development of the self-knowledge and insight needed to grasp the importance of owning one’s own learning process.

For a learner, Learner Agency can be manifested in a variety of domains: exercising choice and taking independent action related to a learning topic or content and the manner in which that topic is addressed; exercising choice and taking independent action regarding the learning environment and the conditions present in those environments; and exercising choice and taking independent action regarding learning pace and learning feedback. The nature and range of options made available at each stage of development can vary. Learner Agency is expected to increase as the learner matures, recognizing that the evolution of Learner Agency is not necessarily linear or incremental. The intention is to have the learner experience being fully responsible and self-reliant in the matter of their own learning well before graduating.



When Learner Agency is present as an element in the learning model, it can be depended upon to enable other elements of the model and to contribute decisively to the development of each learner's life skills and dispositions. We would expect to find the following observable learner outcomes in a learning model with a successful Learner Agency component:

1. Learners develop a sense of ownership regarding their own learning, including a passion for learning, an ability to both create their learning experiences and assess the outcomes, and an interest in continually improving their learning experiences.
2. Learners develop the capacity to articulate their own learning needs and desires with insight into how they learn best and what they specifically need to support their own learning and development.
3. Learners develop adaptability, resourcefulness, and resilience as they handle increasing responsibility for their own learning, informed equally by successful and failed learning experiments.
4. Learners develop a growing self-assuredness and self-confidence with regard to their capacity to direct their own learning, create their own learning experiences, and engage in unstructured learning challenges.
5. Learners experience themselves and their ideas as valued and as valuable; they develop an associated sense of self-worth.
6. Learners, having been supported in taking full ownership of their learning, leave organized education ready to be lifelong learners.

In learning models that do not include a strong element of Learner Agency, the learner is challenged to figure out what others want from them rather than to distinguish their own learning needs. An emphasis on compliance with assigned learning leaves learners as passive receivers of education, dependent on others for their learning.

When increasing Learner Agency is emphasized in the model, learners develop the capacity to direct their own learning. As they seek to make better and better decisions for themselves, learners increasingly take responsibility for incorporating feedback and assessment in their learning. Additionally, they take increasing responsibility for the impact of their choices on others who share the same learning environment.

Learner Agency thrives when learners know themselves, discover their own gifts, and develop themselves as self-confident lifelong learners.

## DISTINGUISHING “SOCIALLY EMBEDDED”

We use the term “Socially Embedded” to refer to a learning model in which 1) a learning community has been intentionally created that provides everyone with a place to be known and a place to belong; and 2) the social nature of learning has been consistently enabled and it is emphasized as a central part of the learning experience.

For a learning model to be called Socially Embedded, each learner must experience themselves as belonging to a learning community, welcomed for who they are and for what they can bring. This learning community offers each learner a web of stable, social relationships within which they experience acceptance, friendship, support, and guidance. Rather than merely being known and related to as learners, each member of the community is known as a whole person with a full range of unique interests, aspirations, characteristics, and background circumstances. As such, every community member is welcomed as a whole person, bringing all aspects of themselves.

In Socially Embedded models, attention is paid to the health of the relationships needed for learning activities, and as importantly, attention is paid to the learning community’s overall health. Like all communities, a learning community requires attention aimed at building trusting relationships, expanding inclusiveness, and ensuring opportunities for everyone to be involved and to contribute. Time and space is set aside to ensure that each member of the community has the opportunity to contribute their unique gifts and to express their unique selves. Social norms and mechanisms are established and maintained to ensure that the community remains a safe and welcoming space for all members.

The learning community includes all of the young learners and adults who regularly engage with one another and are connected through their shared purpose of fostering learning. In “Open-Walled” learning models, the learning community will extend beyond the primary learning environment to include others from their local community and beyond. In cases where learners are more distributed (such as those with geographically dispersed learners, virtual learning groups, or home-schooled learners), the creation of a Socially Embedded learning model will require the intentional design and sustained cultivation of the learning community. In all models, the learning community provides a rich context for social learning. This is where social learning happens.

Whenever a learner is engaged with others in the process of learning, we can say their learning is social. But, when we say a learning model is Socially Embedded, we mean more than the mere provision of social learning opportunities. Making a learning model Socially Embedded involves a significant decision to make learning with others in the learning community a central part of each learner’s journey. This requires that each learner’s pathway be planned so that they are engaged in sustained relationships that support their learning.

Who might a learner be engaged with? A learner can be engaged with 1) adults or more experienced peers who have something to share with the learner, 2) peers who are addressing the same or a similar learning challenge and who will participate in shared discovery, or 3) peers with whom the learner can share what they themselves have previously discovered. Socially Embedded learning models make use of all three. Let’s look more closely at each of these categories:

1. **Engaging with adults or more experienced peers who have something to share with the learner.** These interactions are centered on supporting a learner as they develop some knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions. They may interact with a variety of qualified professionals who are prepared to engage with learners to provide: guidance and advice on how to approach learning, coaching on skills and dispositions, mentoring and role modeling with regard to some specific qualities or accomplishments the mentor has previously attained, or instruction in some particular domain of knowledge or skills. Not only can adults in the system play this role, but often peers further along in their own learning can engage with a learner to provide peer support in these same domains.
2. **Engaging with peers who are addressing the same or a similar learning challenge and who will participate in shared discovery.** Learning with peers involves a conversation for shared discovery. In this conversation, peers generate new discoveries together: building on each other's thinking, providing each other with outside perspective, and encouraging each other. Peers discuss what they see, what they are learning, and what they are stopped by. Often peers work together on learning tasks, group activities, or group projects. When we look at how people learn naturally, we find a large amount of peer-based social learning. Much of what is referred to as unstructured play has this characteristic of shared discovery and represents an important vehicle for learning.
3. **Engaging with peers with whom the learner can share what they themselves have previously discovered.** When a learner has the chance to support the learning of others, they get a learning experience as well. When a learner plays the role of guide, coach, or instructor, they advance their own grasp of the learning. In addition, by supporting others in their learning, a learner develops the social and emotional skills necessary for providing that support, including empathy, patience, generosity, and listening.

When a learning model is Socially Embedded, we would expect to observe the following kinds of outcomes for learners:

- The skills and dispositions needed to collaborate successfully with a diversity of people having a variety of: ages, abilities, and proficiency levels; approaches to problem solving; interests and ambitions; socio-economic backgrounds; ethnic and racial backgrounds; family structures; and/or life experiences;
- The social-emotional and collaborative skills and dispositions needed to be productive participants in an economy that demands teamwork and engaged citizens in a diverse society;
- The skills and dispositions to be in community with others (including effectively handling differences, disagreements, competing values, and adversity); and
- Increased confidence regarding their own knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

## DISTINGUISHING “PERSONALIZED, RELEVANT, AND CONTEXTUALIZED”

By the terms “Personalized,” “Relevant,” and “Contextualized,” we mean those learning experiences that are tailored to make unique connections between the learning challenge at hand and each learner’s unique needs, interests, and circumstances. In this approach to learning, we leave behind the Industrial-age ideas of an “average” or “standard” student, of “one-size-fits-all” curricula, and of process manageability achieved through standardization and exception-handling. “Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized” learning involves the creative integration of each individual’s aspirations, passions, and contexts with learner appropriate learning goals that have been informed by local, state, and national standards and requirements. When learning experiences are made Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized, the education system itself adapts to the particular learner, rather than requiring the learner adapt to the particular education system.

In various efforts to apply this way of thinking to education environments, the terms Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized have been used in many different ways. Quite often, one of these terms is used to characterize an entire learning model rather than a single element. This is a natural outcome of discovery during implementation. When introducing one new element to a model, very often the need for other elements is revealed and terms that were already in use may be stretched to include these additional elements or ideas. However, in this shared conversation, we are going to use the very specific meaning of each term, without stretching them. This will enable effective communication across experiments, across disciplines, and across models.

So, in this conversation, what do we specifically mean by the terms: Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized?

- **By Personalized,** we mean that the learning experience is made responsive to the learner’s individual needs and strengths. When learning is Personalized, we have addressed the question: How can each learner best be supported in their learning and development? Personalized includes taking into account, in terms of both resources and learning designs, the learner’s particular starting point; the appropriate pace at which the learner is to be engaged; the learning needs and gifts of the learner; the unique ways in which the learner learns best; and the learner’s particular background and life circumstances. Personalized further includes responding to the whole child, including their unique needs for: unstructured time, physical activity, creative and artistic expression, play time, and health and well-being support.
- **By Relevant,** we mean that a learning experience is applicable to the learner’s real-world challenges, interests, and/or aspirations. When learning is Relevant for the learner, there is always an answer to the question: Why am I learning this? What is being learned occurs for the learner as useful or in some way applicable to their lives. The learner is clear how their learning supports them in better handling daily life challenges, in enjoying an area of passion, or in pursuing a long-term aspiration. When learning experiences are Relevant, the learner is naturally pulled into them; there is less need for external motivation. Finally, to ensure learning is not restricted to existing circumstances and areas of interest, entirely new experiences are provided that offer the learner attractive opportunities to develop new interests and new passions.

- **By Contextualized**, we mean that the learning experience is effectively embedded within a context for each learner. When learning is Contextualized, there is always an answer to the question: What does this learning mean? When the learner encounters each learning opportunity in a meaningful context, they can assess their own performance and can see how what is being learned fits into the world.

Making learning Contextualized also requires being responsive to the context from which the learner comes. Learners arrive into a learning experience with assets and sensitivities from their own cultural, social, economic, and family contexts. Learning experiences must be responsive to those contexts, avoiding bias and the imposition of perspectives while also leveraging the richness found in the learner's background.

Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized learning experiences press the education system to respond directly and specifically to the learning needs, interests, and circumstances of each learner, assisting them appropriately when they encounter difficulty and propelling them forward in areas where they thrive.

## DISTINGUISHING “OPEN-WALLED”

What do we mean when we say that a learning experience is “Open-Walled?” Taking the term literally, we mean that the experience is not walled in. The idea is that learning is not limited to a closed box called “the classroom” or “the school;” it can happen anywhere. And learning is not limited to a traditional “school day” or “school year;” it can happen anytime. Open-Walled means that education is invited to take place outside the primary learning environment and, at the same time, the outside world is invited into the primary learning environment. In either direction, such learning is Open-Walled. The walls are open.

What walls are we talking about? We are talking about the walls or boundaries around the primary learning environment. In most cases, the primary learning environment will be a central location where learners gather to organize their learning, meet with peers and adults in the system, and access specialized resources. Such a location could be referred to as a “home base” or an “education hub” or a “school.” It is also possible that the primary learning environment can be the learner’s home, a virtual location, or another gathering place in the community. Regardless of what kind of environment is selected as the primary learning environment, the learning can be made to be Open-Walled.

Numerous approaches to learning outside the primary learning environment have been used effectively, these include: learning expeditions to cultural institutions and natural environments; opportunities to register for classes at area colleges, vocational schools, and technical schools; online, multimedia, and computer-based learning opportunities; workplace opportunities such as local internships and co-op education programs; opportunities for organized play and recreation; life experiences such as family travel, personal reading, and hobbies; or participation in community-based activities such as amateur theatre, choir, scouting, or athletics.

In addition, numerous approaches have also been used to effectively bring the outside world into the primary learning environment, these include: internet-based and multimedia learning opportunities brought in from all over the world; opportunities to engage with real-world challenges that are brought in from outside; community-based health and social services brought in to the learners; opportunities to learn from various business and community leaders; and opportunities for the learners themselves to share their Open-Walled learning with each other.

To be called Open-Walled, a learning model must leverage the rich opportunities available beyond the walls of the primary learning environment and integrate those opportunities into the core of the learning model. Simply providing some Open-Walled learning experiences does not make a learning model Open-Walled. Even traditional learning models provide some Open-Walled learning activities. For example, they may have after-school activities, field trips, and career days. However, that does not necessarily make such learning models Open-Walled.

Open-Walled learning models have the following characteristics:

- The entire community and its assets (including its people, organizations, and institutions) are seen as the playing field for learning and for supporting learners;
- Virtual and/or online opportunities, sourced from anywhere in the world, are effectively leveraged in the primary learning pathways;
- Open-Walled experiences are integrated into the whole learning model, rather than being “bolted on.” In other words, Open-Walled experiences are expected to include the other elements of the model, just like any other learning experience would;
- Open-Walled experiences are integrated into each learner’s learning path, assessed similarly to any other learning experience, and counted equally towards the learner’s development;
- Open-Walled learning opportunities are configured to leverage the broader community’s unique resources, values, and needs; and
- Open-Walled learning models reflect an appropriate mix of in-person, virtual, or blended learning opportunities in the places, times, and formats that are a fit for the learners. This involves adults in non-traditional education roles who participate in providing Open-Walled learning pathways and learning experiences learner’s development.

When Open-Walled is a central element in the learning model, it can be depended upon to enable the other elements of the model and to contribute decisively to the development of each learner’s life skills and dispositions. Learners see their learning as being unconstrained by time or place so that Open-Walled experiences are naturally recognized and valued. They will be prepared to be lifelong learners. We would expect to find the following observable learner outcomes:

- The ability to locate and leverage the assets both in his or her community and online;
- The ability to relate to any life experience as a learning experience;
- An increased clarity regarding one’s own interests and passions in life;
- The skills and dispositions needed to be an active community participant and citizen; and
- An increased readiness for a work world that is itself becoming more and more Open-Walled.

When a learning model is committed to being Open-Walled, it can catalyze a network of learning environments, which are hosted by a variety of institutions and organizations in the community, including the education system. These institutions and organizations begin to see more and more ways in which one another’s missions and assets can be complementary.

## DISTINGUISHING “COMPETENCY-BASED”

By the term “Competency-Based,” we are referring to a central characteristic of a learning model where the learning has been organized around building a learner’s capacity to do things proficiently in context, rather than being organized around the accumulation of prescribed knowledge in an academic subject area.

To be competent at something is to be able to do that something effectively and reliably in a variety of circumstances; it is not the mere retention of a given set of facts, procedures, or theories. The difference between Competency-Based approaches and knowledge-based approaches is like the difference between learning to be a good swimmer and learning the theory of swimming. In one case, the learner is able to perform swimming in a variety of circumstances; in the other, the learner knows the facts and theories of swimming. (Fortunately, swimming classes have always been Competency-Based!)

In Competency-Based learning models, a “competency” is an area of performance, and a learner may be considered proficient in a competency when they demonstrate their ability to perform in that area. Knowledge acquisition occurs as part of competency development, not for its own sake. When demonstrating a competency, a learner is demonstrating the knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions that are needed for them to perform that competency effectively. Here, we define “knowledge,” “skills,” and “dispositions” as follows:

- **Knowledge:** The theoretical, conceptual, or practical understanding of something, including what is often referred to as content knowledge;
- **Skills:** The capacities needed to apply knowledge effectively in producing specific results, including the skill to acquire additional knowledge as needed; and
- **Dispositions:** The behaviors and ways of being needed for a person to engage with the world effectively in the circumstances of life, both currently and in the future.

When the term Competency-Based is applied to a learning model, we mean the learning model has two central characteristics:

1. Competencies are the fundamental unit of learning; and
2. Each learner is advancing on their unique learning pathway as they demonstrate competencies reflecting growth towards their learning goals.

### Competencies are the fundamental unit of learning

When competencies form the fundamental unit of learning, the educational outcomes are expressed as competencies, and the pathways for achieving those outcomes are charted with each learner. A learner’s competency development pathway is developed in partnership with the learner by mapping where they are at any point in time (their current accomplishments, aspirations, strengths, and challenges) and then identifying, designing, and creating learner-appropriate opportunities for their continued development toward the achievement of their learning goals. Learning opportunities can include a broad range of learning formats: activity-based learning, blended learning, classroom or seminar based learning, college courses, community-based learning, homeschooling, internships, life experiences, online learning, project-based learning, self-directed study, and student exchanges.



Regardless of learning format, the aim is the development and demonstration of competencies. As such, learning progress for each learner is characterized by the achievement of proficiency in those competencies needed to achieve their overall learning goals. Each learner moves on their own pathway in such a way that they graduate having met or exceeded their own educational aspirations, informed by local, state, and national standards and requirements. Each learner's pathway is designed to ensure that each learner is prepared to be a lifelong learner—able to meet the evolving challenges of 21st century life as an empowered individual, a constructive community member, a productive participant in the economy, and an engaged citizen.

### **Each learner advances on their unique learning pathway**

Having learners advance upon sufficient evidence of proficiency, rather than after some fixed period of study, allows for the variable pacing of learning. This is distinct from learners advancing based on age, grade, and seat time. As long as a learner can demonstrate their proficiency, they can progress to their next learning challenge. This is contrasted with learning models that advance learners based on meeting minimum knowledge requirements in a fixed amount of time. In Competency-Based models, when a learner is progressing too slowly to achieve their goals, additional support resources are provided. When a learner is progressing quickly, or is already proficient, then they can be supported in moving to their next challenge.

Critical to discovering and maintaining appropriate pacing is feedback on learning progress. As with all learning models, Competency-Based models rely on assessment as a critical source of feedback.

In addition to the commonly used “Assessments Of Learning” against third-party standards, there are two additional kinds of assessment present in a Competency-Based model.

1. **“Assessment For Learning,”** which involves the provision of real-time feedback that allows a learner to quickly learn from both successes and failures and to identify where they are getting stuck in their progressions toward proficiency.
2. **“Assessment As Learning,”** which engages the learner in self-reflection and self-discovery. In this kind of self-assessment, learners are building their self-knowledge and learning about the kind of support which allows them to excel.

Competency-Based Learning as an element of a learning model is sometimes referred to as “performance-based learning” or “proficiency-based learning.” We have chosen the label Competency-Based Learning to place our emphasis on what is learned rather than on what is measured.

It should be noted that in various efforts to apply Competency-Based Learning, learner-centered practitioners have found an opportunity to add a number of other complementary elements to their models. For example, Competency-Based Learning makes it easier to make learning experiences “Relevant and Contextualized.” Competency-Based Learning also creates clear opportunities for learners to exercise “Learner Agency” as they co-create their learning pathways. It also supports learners as they take advantage of learning opportunities beyond the traditional walls and hours of a school and in a variety of social settings. In some efforts, the term “Competency-Based” has been stretched to include some or all of these additional elements. In our conversation, we do not stretch the term's meaning. We use the term Competency Based Learning to mean only and specifically learning models where: (1) Competencies are the fundamental unit of learning; and (2) Each learner is advancing on their unique learning pathway as they demonstrate competencies reflecting growth toward their learning goals.





