

Six Reasons to be Optimistic About Learning in 2022



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Join Michael Fullan March 1, 2022

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Six Reasons to be Optimistic About Learning in 2022

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As we enter 2022 humanity is exhausted. Few of us can remember being so downtrodden in our lifetimes. Physical (climate) and social (low trust and mutual dislike) negativity are at extreme levels. Mental stress has rarely been so high for so many. Education is in disarray.

Yet human evolution is a crazy thing. It can rebound when things seem hopeless. It can take off with great speed and power when new configurations begin to appear and feed on themselves. In this respect there are six reasons why I am optimistic about learning in the coming year. Together they provide a runway to future learning that could be transformative.

At the same time the next period could go horribly wrong. There is a vacuum now. Bad things fill vacuums faster than good things do. My six optimistic reasons are not automatic. They provide a platform for what's worth fighting for. The hard work remains to be done. The quality of our future, maybe even our very existence, depends on our individual and collective uptake of these six interrelated themes.

1 *Escaping a bad system.*

Most people already knew in 2019 that the existing educational system was stultified —before Covid struck. At least 75% of students were bored or alienated; inequality was baked into society and worsening. In retrospect we will acknowledge that we were fortunate to be jolted out of a bad system that was harming most of us; indeed, ultimately all of us. Escaping a bad system is reason 1 for being optimistic.

2 *Recognizing and working with our best allies.*

The longer that Covid has persisted the more that students and teachers recognize that change in learning is needed. While tired to the bone in the short run, more and more students and teachers want change in learning compared to what they had before. More powerfully they see each other as allies (students and teachers). They are ready to put in the effort to develop new ideas. Parents too will end up being supporters. Our best partners for better learning are right at our doorstep.

3 *Well-being and Learning are joining forces.*

It was never a good idea to let learning become an academic island. After one year of Covid we realized that well-being was essential to learning. After almost two years, we are concluding that well-being *is* also learning. In addition to the importance of academic knowledge, most people know that human qualities are essential: like compassion, reliability, teamwork, helping others in time of need, gratitude, loyalty, dependability, courage. More people know that mental and physical well-being are crucial, and fragile. Overall, good at learning and good at life will become the new goal.

4 *New more powerful forms of learning are on the rise.*

Three forces for better learning are converging. One consists of ‘new purpose, belonging, meaning, global competencies’ (such as our 6Cs: character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking). A second involves equity and thriving for all becoming deeply integrated in all learning. The third consists of breakthroughs in the science of learning and development related to immersive whole-child learning with respect to ‘pedagogies, partnerships, learning environments, and leveraging digital’ for all in relation to engaging and changing the world. Learning and living will merge around these three aspects. We now have the potential to engage all learners.

5 *Diverse leadership will grow and present new benefits.*

By diverse I mean leaders of all ages, especially the young; and people of a variety of ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds. General populations are rapidly becoming more diverse; sheer numbers will push diversity upwards. Discrimination will remain, but there is a hidden benefit here: people who struggle and move up generally make better leaders. As this becomes more known it will result in more effective leaders being appointed. This movement will face prejudice, but because the potential leaders will be better and more plentiful it will gain momentum.

6 *Systems will begin to change.*

Believe it or not when dysfunctional systems don’t change, they eventually are replaced. We are beginning to see radical cracks within the system toward what I call greater action founded on principles of ‘systemness’. The latter is an awareness on the part of larger numbers of people at all levels that the system needs to be changed, and that such change is the responsibility of peoples from all levels (local, middle, and central). Some of the obvious new developments include: the recognition that eradicating poverty needs to be an explicit goal (with respect to health, food, shelter, safety, jobs)—this in fact is an explicit goal of some systems; replacing punitive standardized tests with new metrics of assessment (such as performance metrics) linked to feedback and developmental learning; and the increased power and interactive presence of the local and the middle with a new role for the centre as a partners in systemness improvement.

It is debatable whether human evolution will inevitably self-correct in positive ways (humans are born to connect but not all forms of connection turn out to be positive). But I do think when destructive patterns begin to feel permanent that most of us, especially the very young, are inclined to want to do something about it. They are our best bet. This is why a strong learning system is key. It will be beautifully ironic if positive contagion turns out to be our savior.