

# There Is No Box

Rewiring Your Mindset About Learning

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# Introduction

There is a series of videos on YouTube entitled ‘Did You Know?’ that really impacted me back in 2010. Paired with intense music, viewers are bombarded with statistics that show just how fast our lives are changing. The data are beyond thought provoking. I get goosebumps every time I watch them. The “Did You Know 3.0” version from 2010 included the following data points:

“The top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004.”

“We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist using technologies that haven’t been invented in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.”

“The amount of new technical information is doubling every 2 years. For students starting a 4-year technical degree, this means that half of what they learn in the first year of study will be outdated by their third year of study.”

Can you imagine that!? And this was 15 years ago! We are truly living in ‘exponential times’ (2010).

At that time, I was a university professor and would often share these predictions with my young students during their first semester. These statistics not only blew my mind, but it also almost certainly left an impression on my students. The room was silent after watching the video. Were we preparing students for this? How do you educate someone for a job, company, or industry that doesn’t exist? How do we create lifelong learners and lifelong educators who greet their Sisyphean boulder roll with resilience, maybe even enthusiasm and excitement? And therein lies one of the biggest problems with education in our country across the board.

Within the realm of education and learning, my passion and focus zero in on adult learners who need life- and career-relevant skills. What is being taught to adult learners, how it is being taught, and why it is being taught fuels my fire. I don’t just think there is a better way to teach/train adult learners, I *know* there is. And that’s why I left my nice, stable job in academia to launch my own immersive learning company, which also led to writing this book.

Truth be told, even though I spent many years in academia and consider myself a lifelong learner, I wasn’t always passionate about school and learning. I didn’t even go

to college right away after high school. I didn't want to do what everyone else was doing, i.e. going to nearby colleges, often with the same friend groups. This resistance to conformity has been a recurring theme my entire life. It took a few years for me to realize that if I was going to have a decent career and enjoy a certain lifestyle, I needed a college degree. That was the understanding and expectation back in the 1980s and 1990s. I eventually returned to school to earn my bachelor's degree in 1993, but something happened along the way. I fell in love with learning. So much so that I continued on to earn two more degrees. 'Back to school' time was my favorite time of year. I absolutely loved the smell in the book store. I was so hungry to learn and be a part of campus life.

That said, over time my perspective of and feelings for higher education changed. For decades, I was continuously either a student or an instructor. I noticed that most educators predominantly utilized traditional teaching methods even though technology and societal expectations were moving at warp speed. Even with the introduction and proliferation of online learning, which has many benefits, too often the only thing that changed was the mode of delivery. We still see recorded (one-way) lectures, lengthy reading assignments with grossly overpriced textbooks, and standard assessments with quizzes or multiple-choice tests. Generally speaking, learning has been and continues to be largely passive. Assessments are too often based on memorization versus application. And even in this digital age, some educators prohibit students from using laptops in the classroom.

There is clearly *le resistance to change* at institutions. As a result, one of the biggest challenges in both higher education and professional development in the workplace is engagement - *or lack thereof*. Why we find this surprising perplexes me.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that there are plenty of educators who believe in using these standard/proven protocols, methodologies, and models. These have stood the test of time, so they must work, right? The origins of traditional teaching methods, which are still found across our universities and organizations today, can be traced back to the mission of higher education, which, according to the American Council of Higher Education's 1949 report, was *to educate students for lives of public service, to advance knowledge through research, and to develop leaders* (Chan 2016). This mission is more than 75 years old. A lot has changed since 1949.

After being a college student for 15+ years and then experiencing the higher education industry from the inside for over 12 years as a professor, I kept asking myself all sorts of 'why' questions.

Why are most formal learning environments and experiences so boring and unengaging?

Why do we accept the status quo?

Why is there such a lack of innovation and agility in teaching/training methodologies?

Why does tech adoption happen at a snail's pace?

Why do students have to pay so much money for formal learning when every bit of information is available at our fingertips on the Internet?

Why hasn't the teaching and learning dynamic changed much over the last 50 years? Or over the last 100 years?

Even within the world of corporate training, organizations are all too often risk-averse when it comes to adopting new technology or experimenting with new tools and methodologies. Undoubtedly, this teaching/learning mismatch exists beyond the walls of academe.

Here are some more good questions: Why am I writing this book? Why does my viewpoint matter?

As a learning junkie, I have been grappling with these issues and thinking about the future of learning – particularly with respect to adult learners – whether we're looking at college students at a university or employees in the workplace. The fire in my belly to drive change for learners led me to leave higher education in 2021 to focus on my own edtech start-up, Edstutia, which I will dive into later in this book. This business has given me a blank slate and the freedom to create learning experiences that tackle the shortcomings of adult learning head-on. Aside from my professional credentials and my personal experiences as an 'expert' student and an educator, I am uber passionate about vastly improving the learning experience, especially with emerging technology.

I am also not writing this book in a vacuum. My co-author, Dr. Yogini Joglekar, is my partner in crime and also the Chief Operating Officer at Edstutia. Her professional background spans adult learning in both academia and corporate learning. She is equally passionate about disrupting the status quo of adult learning and professional development, and she brings a different perspective to the table that is more global in nature. We have both earned multiple university degrees and sat in the learner's seat for decades. Subsequently, we have also stood in the front of the room as teachers or

trainers for decades. Those experiences and perspectives about learning have greatly impacted our careers and passions.

It's important to know that this book isn't just about our opinions and personal stories. It is chock full of supporting data and statistics, as well as interviews from relevant thought leaders and change agents to provide a holistic, fact-based message. Look at it this way: We are taking historical data and future-forward predictions and enveloping those with our personal experiences, as well as other relevant stories and pearls of wisdom, to present an eye-opening message that warrants action.

**I'm here to inform you that the learning experience needs a major overhaul.** It has become transactional rather than transformational. Learners are bored and disengaged, which leads to suboptimal learning outcomes. Retention rates are low because of the way we are teaching and training. We are tracking the wrong metrics in the wrong ways. Sadly, students and employees alike often find learning obligatory and a means to an end – such as a diploma or certificate or completing a checklist to be eligible for a promotion or even an entry-level job. In many instances, employees see training as a disruption to their daily workload, which then becomes more of a nuisance than a value-added opportunity.

**I'm also here to inform you that in order to drive change, we must first change our mindsets.** About teaching. About training. About learning. About the purpose of learning. About the needs of learners. About emerging technology. About the world we live in.

***There is No Box*** was written for educators, professors, trainers, professional development leaders, Human Resources professionals, learning leaders of all flavors, and lifelong learners like us who truly want to shape the future of learning with a renewed mindset. It is for people who understand that the status quo of teaching and training has to change *for the sake of the learners*. Yes, change is hard. Altering one's mindset doesn't happen overnight. But we are up against the wall, and it is up to the learning leaders of the world to lead, not follow.

We will take you back to the roots of teaching and training to understand how we got to where we are today. We dive into why we consider the current state of teaching and training a crisis. We look at the greater implications of the absence of progress and ingenuity in education. We dissect innovative teaching methods and their effectiveness, and explain why they often miss the mark. We dive into various factors of our modern world that are challenging – and sometimes downright disrupting – the status quo of traditional learning environments and methodologies. We share some examples of

people and organizations that are truly driving innovation in education to spark some ideation. We also look at the forces of change and how to embrace them. All along the way, we will introduce you to new ways of thinking about learning that will forever change your mindset about the purpose and possibilities of learning.

Gone are the days of thinking and acting inside a conceptual box. Gone are the days of patting oneself on the back for ‘thinking outside the box.’ This book will challenge your personal stance on learning, help you reframe what learning can and should be, and then set you up with resources, tools, and *the will* to change. We propose alternative methods and mindsets to positively impact learning outcomes. We provide action-oriented suggestions and resources, as well as a web page associated with the book that includes reports, articles, statistics and more to support your own efforts. This web page will be updated on a regular basis to ensure you have access to the latest data, research, and thought leadership. This also ensures that this book does not become obsolete by the time it gets into your hands.

Adult learning is a Sisyphean endeavor. No sooner have we reached the summit, bringing our learners through the peaks and troughs of their education and corporate training journeys, does their learning get outdated, with workplace and societal realities moving at the speed of light. The boulder rolls down and, like Sisyphus, it seems as if learners need to start all over again. For Sisyphus, being condemned to roll his boulder up the hill for eternity was a punishment. For learners, it’s an opportunity.

The purpose of this book isn’t just to read and ponder some new information. The purpose of this book is to inspire you to walk the walk and be a change agent. And our ultimate goal is to help you realize that ***There is No Box.***

# Chapter 1: The Purpose of Learning

We learn for various reasons and in a multitude of ways, i.e. formal, informal, on the fly out of necessity, personally, and professionally. Sometimes we don't even realize we are learning. But when it comes to deliberate, more formalized education and training, have you ever asked yourself 'Why learn?' Yogini's son threw her for a loop a few years ago when he tossed this question back at her.

"Why learn?" My teen's two words brought my teaching high crashing down.

We were speaking about his dream career and how applying himself in the classroom and extracurricular learning pathways, as well as social settings (i.e. networking and attending events) would help him move closer to his goal. I had just returned home from my own classroom after delivering a well-executed lesson plan. I told him that *my* learners were engaged. There was laughter. We even moved around the room, identifying and acting out communication styles and practicing business networking skills. I tried to explain to my interlocutor: by learning, you can become proficient and excel at something.

Q: Why?

A: You can earn a living and help others through your knowledge.

Q: Why?

A: [By now, I was catching on to the theme.] This is Survival 101. You live in a society with expectations and roles, where you are giving and receiving.

Q: Why? I am fine on my own, learning and creating on my own terms, for myself. Don't you always talk about the joy of learning?

The question of 'Why learn?' stewed inside of Yogini. The naivete and idealism of this exchange with her son aside, learning and adapting to the perspectives of a new generation (you know, the ones that fill the seats in your classrooms and new hire orientations) is probably one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, parts of teaching.

Think about it. We update our phones, our wardrobes, our home decor. However, we are still learning the same way we did when life revolved around agriculture and rural societies as depicted in an *Edtech Digest* article by Kavitta Ghai entitled "Why Are We Still Learning the Same Way We Did 400 Years Ago?" "Since 1635, we have learned in

the exact same way in the U.S.: an arrow that points from one teacher's mouth to their students' ears and ends there. One teacher that is in charge of relaying any and all information to their students, with the students expected to simply absorb it and magically become intelligent" (Ghai 2022).

Why does the teaching and learning experience remain relatively stagnant? Perhaps because we focus more on the "what" than the "why" of learning. As instructors, we dust off our lecture notes to refresh our memory of key concepts. We might rearrange chairs into a circle for better group dynamics or plan a multimedia lesson for greater engagement. But how often do we think about the "why"? Without preparing our learners for the bigger picture – figuring out how what they learn translates into what they will do in their professional and personal lives – the question of 'why learn?' is not often thought about. We just do it.

Let's play the old word association game. When you hear or see the word ***learning***, what immediately comes to your mind? What *words* do you associate with learning? Books? Classrooms? Tests? Boring? Maybe stress? It would be interesting to know if you came up with positive or emotionally-driven words like: Fun. Exciting. Rewarding. Fulfilling. The answers will also likely be different depending upon if you are pondering this question from a learner or a teacher/trainer perspective. Those in the teaching/training/professional development profession *choose* to be the one guiding learners; however, most learners are required to complete courses, workshops, etc. as a part of their personal and professional growth journey. To learners, learning is often perceived as a necessary evil.

Here's my next question: What is *the purpose* of learning? Is it a means to an end? Is it because of the possibility of earning a degree, obtaining a bigger paycheck, or getting a promotion? Again, I will likely get different answers to this question, and that's OK because the purpose of learning is morphing over time. You see, for hundreds—if not thousands—of years, the goal/act/objective/purpose of learning was for a subject matter expert to disseminate knowledge or information to others, which they in turn could make sense of said information, develop new skills, and apply them in meaningful ways in their personal and professional lives. Sound like a fair place to springboard from?

## Historically Speaking

Now, the purpose of formal learning has changed over time depending on who was being taught and for what skill set. For example, some of the first universities in western society were established in Europe as early as the ninth century to largely groom theologians and civic leaders. By the late 19th century, the curriculum evolved to

include languages and literature, and then by the 20th century more humanities and business-related topics were included in the formal curriculum (2025). Why the change? Because there was a need to educate more people on relevant topics as civilization evolved.

Consider the industrial revolution in the mid-1800s. Given the developments in science and technology that transformed societies, the focus of learning transitioned to hard skills to manage people and machines in manufacturing plants - a rather regimented structure (2023). As more career options emerged in the 20th century, more universities and colleges also emerged. Formal higher education became ingrained in our societal fabric as a necessary step in life for upward mobility in most career paths.

Beginning in the 1980s, the purpose of higher education was essentially to prepare young people for professional careers with an emphasis on management skills. And as we entered the age of technology and the digital revolution, new skills yet again were in demand in the workplace. Over time, we have seen a gradual change in the focus and purpose of higher education in direct response to societal, economic, or global demands. Certain skills, jobs, and careers become irrelevant and outdated, while other opportunities materialize that require new skill sets. It's clear to see that the evolution of the purpose of learning focused on the 'what' (what skills were in demand, what was being taught) and somewhat on the 'why' (industry or global events commanded updated skills), but has the learning experience evolved in step with the learner's purpose?

We can keep turning the pages back to ancient Greek philosophers and how they shaped the learning experience. As noted in *The Republic* by Plato, the Socratic method aimed to stimulate critical thinking and uncover underlying assumptions (1955). According to Aristotle in his book *Nicomachean Ethics*, the purpose of education is the development of virtuous character (1902). Similarly, in ancient India, education was intertwined with philosophy as explained in *Indian Philosophy as a Means for Understanding Modern Ashram Schools* (Wijesinghe 1987).

Consider that the "ashram" system in India divided life into four stages: the student, the householder, the forest dweller, and the renunciate according to the *Jabala Upanishad*, an ancient Sanskrit text that was published in 300 BC. Hermitage schools were called *gurukuls* (literally, house of the teacher) and served as centers of intellectual and spiritual pursuit, preparing men and women with religious, political, and scientific knowledge as well as life skills with a guru imparting education word of mouth (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Fascinating, isn't it? We find the religious and political references interesting, and very much appreciate the Socratic method for giving learning more meaning, i.e. to think, to analyze, to ask questions for deeper meaning.

In his book *The Path to Purpose*, Stanford professor William Damon defines purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond self" (2009). Sir Ken Robinson, world renowned advisor and author on education, describes education as the "two great human journeys": an inner journey to explore the self (grappling with "who am I?" or learning as feeling) and an outer journey to contribute to the world ("how do I connect?" or learning as doing) (NACCCE 1999). So if we combine these two concepts from Damon and Robinson, it looks like they are in alignment with the aforementioned ancient philosophers and systems. The purpose of learning is to prepare learners for a life of social and political engagement, and personal/professional fulfillment, but also to accomplish something *meaningful*—not just for oneself, but for humanity/society.

## Learning Leader Insights

This question 'What is the purpose of learning today?' stirs inside our heads and is the focus of many a discussion in our professional circles. We have a lot of personal experience and opinions to share from recent years, but digging up all this historical information certainly helps to understand how we got to where we are today as well as the baseline for most formal education.

To round out our comprehension, I recently asked several learning leaders at prominent institutions this same question. As expected, the answers were varied, but all thought-provoking.

**Dr. Bryan Alexander**  
**Author of 'Academia Next: The Futures of Higher Education',**  
**Senior Scholar at Georgetown University, Edtech Futurist**

"Forty or fifty years ago, people went to college in order to learn for themselves. They learned their vocation. They learned their skills. They learned who they were as persons. And I think that that desire is still there. But there has always been a second desire, which is to go to college in order to get a better job, to improve your skills, to use the credential of a degree in order to improve your standing in the marketplace. If we've got more and more people with more and more degrees, [people] have more skills. They are able to improve the quality of life for everybody, the economy, and civilization. In addition, we have changes in

our economy, changes in our politics, changes in our culture, and those are all reasons why we have these shifts in the purpose of learning.”

**Dr. Christopher Dede**

**Senior Research Fellow, Harvard Graduate School of Education**

“In our recent book *The 60-Year Curriculum: New Models for Lifelong Learning in the Digital Economy*, my co-editor (John Richards) and I suggest that ‘disruptive shifts in higher education and in working lives require a revolution in educational objectives’. The underlying idea is that we’re going to live longer. We don’t want to outlive our money, so we have to have multiple careers. And those multiple careers involve re-skilling and upskilling all the time to keep up with what’s going on in the world. Therefore, it’s important for us [as learning leaders] to move from a model of formal education to lifelong learning, and to *empower* lifelong learning, rather than simply empowering formal education.”

**Dr. Michael Crow**  
**President, Arizona State University**

“We’re in a world in which universities are basically designed to produce workers for the trailing economy. They have not been built to the extent that they should have been built to enhance the ability of humans to actually fulfill their complete learning potential. Let me give you an example. The most mathematically complicated thing in the known universe is the human brain. Because there are 80 to 100 billion neurons, and there are 10,000 synapses per neuron. There is nothing [in existence] at that level of complexity. So why do we have that [capacity]? Well, we don’t have it so that we can be trained to be wire cutters, right? Is it so that we can really master the interface of your hand with a wooden plow being pulled by a mule? No. We have evolved to the point now in our rapidly evolving world where human empowerment is accelerating, and this is what’s getting everybody scared. People don’t want human empowerment to accelerate.

The purpose of learning must not be preparation for work as the key objective, but preparation for adaptation, which includes the preparation for work, but isn’t only the preparation for work.”

**Dr. Michael Baston**  
**President, Cuyahoga Community College**

“Today, learning is personal. There was a time when you learned for a specific

purpose, to do a specific task, or to be on a specific track. Well, that's not how it works today. Right now, educational institutions are resetting, recognizing that we can't just offer what we think people want, or we think people should know, or we think people should receive. We have to respond to the interests, the concerns, and the ways in which people want to live and work."

## Purpose, Empowerment, and Relevance

There are clearly a lot of varying thoughts and opinions on the purpose of learning, but there are some common themes that have emerged during our research: having purpose on a personal level, empowering people to become lifelong learners, and adapting the curriculum to remain relevant with respect to industry and societal demands.

Now, here's the real question: Do we as educators and corporate learning professionals identify with all of these learning purposes? Do we actively create meaningful learning experiences that matter for the individual and their contributions to society? Or do we favor the "sit-and-get" model of education or training as a credentialing factory, instrumental for better performance, but of not much purpose beyond that?

In the early 20th century, John Dewey emphasized learning by doing and a curriculum that connected multiple subjects and encouraged students to explore their environments. At around the same time in Italy, Maria Montessori based learning on self-directed activity, hands-on learning, and collaborative play. Intrinsic motivation becomes the foundation of Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's growth mindset concept (Dweck and Leggett 1988). According to Dr. Dweck, "when entire companies embrace a growth mindset, their employees report feeling far more empowered and committed; they also receive greater organizational support for collaboration and innovation" (Dweck 2016).

In the 1980s, educator and researcher Malcolm Knowles popularized the concept of andragogy, the practice of teaching adults, and contrasted it with pedagogy, the practice of teaching children (2022). Andragogy theory states that adult learners are vastly different from children in terms of their motivation, the relevancy of the education to their lives, and how they apply that education. In practice, adult learning focuses on giving adults an understanding of why they are doing something, lots of hands-on experiences, and less instruction so they can tackle things themselves. Many adult learning theories developed out of Knowles' work in the following decades, all with the specific goal to enhance teaching methods and experiences for adult learners.

Our vision for the future of learning is to integrate cognitive skills with emotional intelligence and experiential skills. This involves going back to pedagogical movements such as those developed by progressive educators at a variety of learning levels. For example, the “head, heart, and hands” learning framework supported by Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in the early 19th century emphasized psychomotor, affective, and cognitive development in equal measure (Brühlmeier 2010). This is in alignment with learning through thinking, feeling, and doing.

All these methodologies and mindsets have one thing in common: they give agency to the learners and empower them to question, connect, and take learning beyond the realm of theory and memorization. They create environments in which learners connect a purpose to what they are learning. “We only think deeply about the things we care about,” says USC Professor of Education, Psychology, and Neuroscience Helen Immordino-Yang (2007). Immordino-Yang explains that when learners identify the ‘why’ behind learning, they are more likely to succeed in building memories, engaging complex thoughts, or making meaningful decisions. And this is supported neurobiologically as well.

Learning is deeply tied to emotions, which are crucial for memory, decision-making, and creativity. Consider this at an organizational level: Custom learning solutions that are relevant to job roles and engaging in format can create emotional connections, leading to more effective and motivated learning. It’s no surprise that colleges and companies are increasingly trying to identify purpose in their talent pools, because students/learners with purpose are proven to be deep learners and better stress managers (Damon 2009).

Purpose and relevance can be two sides of the same coin in professional development. For example, workshops on new talent review systems held a month away from annual review discussion dates will have a greater impact than those held six months prior to the new system launch.

Relevance is also about interpersonal connections between instructors and learners. Immordino-Yang notes that great teaching encompasses social, emotional, and cognitive aspects along with knowledge transfer (2007). “Great teachers engage with the broader personhood of a student more than other teachers do, and tailor their feedback accordingly” (Woo 2019). What a great way to build trust and create a safe learning space, thereby fostering purposeful, relevant, and empowered learning.

## **So What? Now What?**

Providing purposeful, empowering and relevant learning experiences is critical to keeping learners engaged, which is one of the biggest challenges professors and trainers face. According to a 2022 Workplace Intelligence study on upskilling, nearly three quarters of Millennial and Gen Z employees were considering quitting their jobs due to a lack of skills development opportunities (2022). This lingering disconnect between learners and learning leaders can have a far reaching impact on organizations. When people are checked out, it leads to sub-par engagement, commitment, and productivity. This isn't good for anyone.

As we've purported, the purpose of learning in contemporary society is to empower learners to gain and share knowledge in meaningful ways, to fulfill both their inner and outer learning journeys. Isn't the real value of learning when you can do something with that knowledge? When you can grasp new and relevant ideas and skills to apply in your life or career? Knowledge that simply stays lodged in your mind only has so much value. It should subsequently be shared, experimented with, and put into action. In other words, consider that the purpose of learning is not lodged in the present, but is actually to prepare for the future, for reaching one's fullest potential, and being a contributing member of an organization and society.

Keep in mind that our career paths are no longer linear and predictable, and thus requires a *deconstruction* of jobs to *reconstruct* them with the future in mind. As Nuno Gonçalves, Global Head of Strategic Capability at Mars, Inc. states, "With the speed of technological and sociological evolution we're experiencing, the world is becoming multi-linear and we will need different combinations of skills. We know most jobs will be different, others disappear, and others will be created – and we want to be ready and develop our associates to thrive in this multi-linear world" (Gallagher et al. 2021). This exact vision and mindset will bring purpose back to so many people.

One of the most poignant things educators should be doing is preparing learners for change, to think differently, to be problem-solvers, to be agile. As Arizona State University (ASU) President Michael Crow shared with me, the purpose of learning today must not be just about preparing people just for jobs, but rather preparing people for adaptation. Universities can no longer put students through a regimented, prescribed experience as if they were being groomed to be a line worker in a factory. Now, there is no one-size-fits-all blueprint to follow for uncertainty and disruption, but we *can* put more emphasis on preparing learners for the unknown.

Here are a few things we can do to begin empowering our learners:

- 1) Ask learners what is most important to them in their lives and what makes them interested in the topics at hand. Help them connect the dots so they see the relevancy of learning something new.
- 2) Experiment with both formal and informal learning to keep things fresh. Action-oriented learning is significantly more enjoyable and engaging.
- 3) Develop content that integrates both solo and social learning. People tend to have a preferred way of learning that plays to their strengths, but tapping into the collective wisdom of a team can present increased purpose and accountability.
- 4) Alter your curriculum so the learner's objectives aren't solely about a grade or checking a box. Help them develop a renewed mindset about and appreciation for learning that will stick with them long term.
- 5) Consider realigning your teaching/training practices to create more effective and inspiring learning environments, whether that be in person or online.
- 6) Push yourself and your learners out of your comfort zones. This is where change accelerates.