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Identifying new “big ideas” for education requires new ways of thinking about old problems.

Big Ideas for Education

How do you get a big idea into education? Philanthropists, states, districts, business leaders, and even the federal government have been struggling with this idea.

A recent Big Ideas Fest sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) was designed to help professionals from diverse sectors work together to create solutions for a host of challenging education dilemmas. But this meeting was more than the typical get-together-and-discuss gathering. It was structured in a unique — and, I think, masterful — process that put learning and the learner front and center.

The meeting began with all 150 participants attending a larger session and listening to global entrepreneurs in education who could inspire us and give us some key principles around design challenges.

Each “rapid-fire” presenter spoke for 10 minutes with no time for questions. Then, we transitioned into “Action Collabs,” diverse groups of 10 to 15 individuals who were educators, administrators, developers, technology people, and college students who would solve a problem together during the Big Ideas Fest. The Action Collabs moved us from brainstorming to designing to testing to creating a tangible solution at the meeting, but we also learned a process we could use in our own organizations.

My Action Collab was challenged with “how to enable teachers to have the greatest impact on learners.” Other Action Collabs worked on “how to create learning opportunities for students pushed out of formal education” and “how to create alternatives for certifying or credentialing learning, as a means of expanding education and career opportunities.”

Brainstorming a Solution

Erin McKean, CEO and co-founder of Wordnik.com, a former editor at Oxford Uni-

versity Press, kicked off the day as one of four rapid-fire leaders. McKean shared the story of how she embarked on creating an online dictionary that would be more accessible and relevant than print dictionaries. According to the web site, Wordnik has collected more than 4 billion words of text in order to show examples of words in use.

After the rapid-fire presentation, we retreated into our Action Collab groups to ponder how to integrate what we had learned into designing a solution for our problem. This process was repeated over and over again, with a rapid-fire presentation followed by Action Collab time. (For a full list of rapid-fire speakers, go to www.bigideasfest.org/2010/program.)

In our first Action Collab, we identified opportunities for addressing a specific central problem (for my Collab, how to enable teachers to have the greatest impact on learners) by conducting research. Unique to this conference, our research included talking with real students who had struggled in their own educational attainment. Nothing fictitious.

This conference offered much that was valuable, but providing the authenticity and touchstone of talking to students about their learning was a highlight. Those conversations made the design process real and not just an “exercise at a meeting.” The students gave simple yet profound comments that gave us insight into what needed to be solved. The students were clear: They needed support but wanted to be pushed. They need this not just from school personnel, but from multiple individuals, including such extended family members as grandparents, parent’s friends, teachers, other students, employers, and more. Students considered being *pushed* to achieve as a form of *support* they desperately yearned for and needed in order to get through. That idea was central to our work at the meeting.

After identifying opportunities for our central problem, each Action Collab began to dig deeper into opportunities as a way to design an idea to prototype. Our rapid-fire presenters during this portion of the meeting included

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Diego Navarro, founder of the Academy for College Excellence, who described how students who had traumatic academic and life experiences needed to connect with a positive learning environment that would set them on a path for education and career success. His design principles focused on helping students be resilient and persist in their educational attainment. Another rapid-fire presenter, Jennifer Anastasoff, president of EnCorps, which transitions corporate professionals into teaching careers, told the story of refining her idea of recruiting and training individuals from science, technology, engineering, and math fields to become teachers.

Creating a Prototype

The next step for the Action Collabs was to pick an idea we had brainstormed and figure out how to do a prototype of it. Christopher Rush used his experience as co-founder of School of One, a New York City public school that emphasizes individualized learning, to explain how to customize learning by using technology to identify each student's needs and preferred learning methods. Educators would then track each child's learning by using an algorithm and would respond to that information through a combination of teaching methods.

The highlight to learning about prototyping was hearing about failure. Constance Steinkuehler, an assistant professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison, described designing an after-school program for high schoolers that was built around massive online learning. The original model centered on structured play facilitated by teachers. Students were turned off by that approach, so Steinkuehler re-designed the after-school program into a loose, free-flowing environment in which students were in charge of their own time. This change led to improved student performance and engagement.

"We ended up realizing that interest is driving the learning, not the technology, not the game, not the narrative. It was the fact that they were interested in the first place," Steinkuehler said. She emphasized that, instead of inciting creativity, prior knowledge and experience can often be barriers to prototyping.

Scaling an Idea

As we worked in our Action Collabs, it was tough to start narrowing in on just a few of our previous solutions in an effort to really high-

light different aspects of the product or service we were developing. The process was designed to help us provide feedback, but the process also encouraged us to remain open-minded and prevented us from getting too attached to one idea. My group was not too attached to one idea, but we were deeply attached to the concept of push and support. As if prototyping an idea wasn't difficult enough, we then moved into perhaps the most challenging aspect of innovation in education — scaling. A colleague who works closely with education start-ups once called this the "valley of death" because scaling or distribution is where all start-ups fail.

More rapid-fire presenters helped us with scaling. Maya Enista, CEO of Mobilize.org, reminded us that many of today's and certainly tomorrow's students can solve our problems if we would listen to them.

One of the most entertaining and instructive rapid-fire speakers on scaling was Salman Khan, who founded the Khan Academy, a non-profit that provides free video lectures and other resources to students around the globe. Khan believes education content is more scalable than software. Khan has rock-star status on YouTube, where more than a million users a month watch the 1,800-plus lessons he has taught. Comically stated yet insightful, Khan left us with this thought on the scaling of content: "If Isaac Newton had done calculus videos on YouTube, I'd have no job, assuming he would be good" (mindshift.kqed.org/2010/12/salman-khan-teaches-the-world-one-youtube-video-at-a-time).

Big Ideas?

At the end of the three days, nine ideas were presented that shared common themes to the challenges. Did we come up with the big idea? Probably not. But we did leave with a process for aiding idea creation and a recognition that we need to prototype multiple feasible ideas that start with the learner in mind. We also left feeling optimistic and with a broader network of like-minded entrepreneurs.

Lisa Petrides, president of ISKME, the sponsoring organization for the meeting, said, "Our education system is at a crossroads. We need big change, but our reform efforts produce only marginal improvements. We tinker with an education system that was designed for an earlier century, when what we really need is to create new hybrid ways of working together." **K**

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