



# Having a New Kind of Conversation in a New Way

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This is the second of two essays the American Council on Education (ACE) as produced as an intentional effort to create space to imagine what higher education might look like well into the future. As these essays note, what it means to be “educated” has changed drastically over time and will continue to do so at an accelerated pace. ACE hopes that by addressing the long-term future of higher education now, we can help to build a better system for subsequent generations.

We invite readers who are interested in joining such a conversation to contact Lindsey Myers, director and principal program officer, Education Futures Lab, ACE, by emailing [lm Myers@acenet.edu](mailto:lm Myers@acenet.edu).

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*The only way to make things possible in the future is for someone to bring them there.*

In the first essay, we talked about the need to have a different kind of conversation about the long-term future of higher education in America and what it would look like by asking again *what higher education is for* and *what it will mean to be educated* in the face of major challenges such as artificial intelligence (AI), climate change, demographic shifts, and increasing costs.

In this essay, we want to talk about why that new kind of conversation requires engaging each other in a different way and what that way looks like.

The preceding essay made the distinction between reaction and response as approaches to addressing the future of higher education. Reaction is thought and action that operates within the existing dominant meaning framework. It thinks and acts on the basis of how situations and challenges are currently understood, the methods used to frame and approach them, and what currently matters and what doesn't. It also applies existing hierarchies of goals and values to the identification and choice of options. Reaction is used to frame immediate concerns, such as how faculty can address students' use of ChatGPT to cheat on exams or what colleges and universities can do to address declining enrollment and low retention rates. In the world of reactions, testing and grading, enrollment and retention figures, faculty loads, financing models, etc., are what they are. When challenges arise, they stay what they are, and one fixes what's gone wrong in relation to them. Reaction—reliance on our inherited dominant meaning framework—is also used to identify and frame the nature of future challenges, such as how higher education will need to adapt to address climate change, population decline, shifts in the economy, and further developments in generative AI and to generate the lists of goals, options, and approaches that may offer solutions.

Response, on the other hand, is a form of situated understanding wherein one comes from a lived-through sense that is more attuned to what our current experiences seem to require than what any inherited framework of meanings, principles, or methods are telling us our available options are. Response gives us the opportunity to note whether the usual response seems experientially fitting and when it seems—with varying degrees of intensity—not to be and then to stay open to the unorthodox, the marginalized, the ideal, and the imagined because all possibilities—no matter how popular, unpopular, or even forbidden—are being measured against the needs engendered by our current experience rather than some cultural or professional standard of what one is “supposed” to do. These recovered and refashioned meanings can then support the development of nascent possibilities for future action that will have arrived from outside the box of our present meaning framework. In doing so, responsiveness can help shape the long-term future and what is possible within it.

We then described three approaches to recovering marginal meanings and generating pools of future possibilities, which we called experiential self-awareness, taking notice, and retrieving. A community-driven response process arrived at in this way would constitute a new kind of conversation about the future of higher education.

However, in that essay, we also described two obstacles to thinking and acting past the present dominant meaning framework. The first is that our dominant meaning framework is remarkably totalizing in its narrowly focused instrumentalism; we see this in its tendency to brand meanings operating outside of it with labels that include inefficient, unmeasurable, and sometimes even irrational that arise from a tightly bound set of values around elements such as efficiency, optimization, growth, measurement, and outcomes.

The second, our focus in *this* essay, is that the dominant understanding about how to arrive at actionable knowledge—that is, the ways we have inherited for having conversations that arrive at creative and well-informed reactions—will not serve us in this moment. We will first address that challenge and then briefly describe what will be needed to structure and execute conversations that arrive at responses that are both shaped to fit the future and fitted to shape the future.

When academic experts and leaders convene to discuss some aspect of the future of higher education, their task is usually to ensure that we capture everything we know; determine whether and where additional empirical investigation is necessary; provide calculated extrapolations based on solid understanding of current conditions and recognized trends; use futuring methodologies such as scenario planning; offer informed speculation when firm empirical guidance is lacking; brainstorm new options; and provide recommendations for moving forward. This is the important work of reaction. In doing this work, the expert participants often find themselves supported by the ability to work from and stay within their intellectual and professional comfort zones, but these kinds of efforts are often hindered by the need to work effectively across disciplines.

Our approach will avoid this cross-disciplinary challenge, and it will exploit the comfort zone created by expertise in a novel way. Disciplinary siloes have high walls and are difficult to both penetrate and escape. Disciplinary training, specialized concepts and language, and paradigmatic ways of seeing and addressing what is presented often lead to a lack of hermeneutic resources—the ability to hear appropriately what others from outside the discipline are trying to communicate. In expert convenings such as the one we are proposing, this is a commonly recognized challenge that often limits the effectiveness of such efforts. As will become clear, however, our approach will largely avoid this issue. The comfort zone arises from thorough training, methodological proficiency, and years of success framing and solving domain-specific problems, and it provides a level of confidence and security that experts are loath to abandon. In our proposed convening, which is designed to generate community-driven responses, comfort and confidence are not our friends. Indeed, as we will see, the key to responsiveness is the ability not only to recognize but also to work with and through discomfort.

The kind of discomfort that supports being responsive begins with what such a convening invites you to bring into the room and what it asks you to leave at the door. It invites you to bring your experience-based expertise in higher education and related institutions, organizations, and contexts *but not in theoretical ways*. There will be no storming, no forming, no norming, and no performing; no speculation and no extrapolation; no use of meta-methods; no appeals to social theory and none of John Dewey's theory of problem-solving; and this effort will not be about engaging your soft skills. In short, most of the ways you are used to coming to such a meeting will not be appropriate, and it will be important to accept the discomfort this generates.

We liken this to the feeling anyone would get when their car breaks down and they go to look under the hood. In that moment, they are confronted with the surprise of a hybrid motor, of which some elements are recognizable but many are not where they are supposed to be, and it's hard to make sense of what's being seen. In a general sense, this example points to the feeling that the usual ways you are used to coming at situations will not be appropriate in this situation. Accepting this feeling keeps you in touch with all of the ways in which your own historicity—expectations given to you by history, culture, society, profession, and discipline—is setting you up to react in particular ways and reminds you that those usual moves are not appropriate in this setting. This discomfort points to the need to stay open to the newness of this situation.

In a more specific sense, if we ask you to probe the discomfort generated by our example of the surprise of looking under the hood one step further, a second source of discomfort may arise. Unlike the first, which we have characterized as the discomfort of realizing that what we bring to a situation is inappropriate for the task, the second is the disharmony created by the lack of fit between what we are living through meaningfully and the dominant meanings our tradition makes available. In the case of our example, for many in our society, anyone can be surprised by the appearance of a hybrid engine when they open the hood. But for others, experience tells them that the setup—the existing framework of meaning—in our example presumes “anyone” to be male, old enough to have worked on car engines, and privileged enough to be able to afford a hybrid car. For people with that experience, the term *anyone* can no longer be used to mean everyone without distorting the situation. This sense of discomfort as disharmony is central to the three approaches—experiential self-awareness, taking notice, and retrieval—that we will use to identify marginal meanings that can serve as the basis for generating future possibilities.

## Approaches

Experiential self-awareness is what can arise when a poet looks for the right word to finish the poem—probing the discomfort with the words their inheritance would expect one to say in order to find new expressions that are responsive to what the poem-in-the-making seems to demand. This is our most basic way of getting in touch with the disharmony and probing our experience for new possibilities.

Taking notice starts from experiential self-awareness. It uses ideas and language from outside the dominant tradition to both reveal limitations with one's own tradition as well as invite ideas that feel responsive to the initial discomfort.

Retrieval also begins from experiential self-awareness, but it uses appeals to the past to help us illuminate the path that brought us to our current condition and made us who we are and to go back and explore paths not taken.

## Examples

**Experiential Self-Awareness:** A current challenge faced by many faculty is that generative AI tools have made it impossible for them to test students in their traditional ways. Many have reacted by modifying their testing regime in ways that limit or negate the ability of AI to interfere with the assessment of students' progress—at least for present iterations of AI. But one could also envision how experiential self-awareness could help develop long-term responses to this manifestation of AI in the classroom. Such an effort begins with faculty who—each for their own reasons and with regard to their own circumstances—come to feel that efforts at modification feel like the very end game of a chess match or the experience of Whack-A-Mole. Instead of repeatedly reacting and looking for mainstream fixes for every new challenge to the usual testing game, they interrogate their own experience: “What is it about this way of testing and the practicing of fixing it every time it faces a new challenge that concerns me? Where does my concern lie? Is it with the morality of cheating, with my inability to properly assess student progress, or perhaps with the ways in which testing has come to be the tail that wags the dog of teaching?” Or, more fundamentally, by asking, “Do I feel a growing tension between what I actually do in the classroom and the means by which I assess student progress?” Maybe it is true that conveying information and teaching logical reasoning, statistics, and research methods are easily automated and always updatable when AI learns to beat the present process. “But is this all I teach or want to be teaching? What important classwork, then, might I not be assessing at all?”

All of these kinds of questions do three things. First, they help faculty members locate (identify, name, and characterize) the specific discomfort they are experiencing. Second, they allow faculty members to explore the setup within which these questions have resonance—both positively and negatively. How are teaching, testing, information, instruction, and progress understood? And how are these and related concepts arrayed within the broader setup we have inherited such that these terms—and now the context to which they belong—seem obvious and so available to be rethought, recontextualized, and reimaged? And third, they allow faculty members to work back and forth between their discomfort and a variety of reimaginings—not disconnected speculation suggesting that anything is possible but rethinkings grounded in deep experience with higher education, our culture, and their elastic capacities—in order to arrive at formulations that feel responsive to the initial concern rather than well-aligned with the language, concepts, and other aspects of the setup that we have inherited and that function as the usual way of seeing things.

In the context of a series of convenings designed to develop long-term responses to higher education challenges, experiential self-awareness would be used to identify and explore shared concerns. The goal will not be fully formed solutions—in part because the dominant tradition will prevent anything arrived at outside the existing educational system from being viewed as real, actionable possibilities at this time. What can be produced in this way are rich reimaginings of the ways the setups function and variations on the ways concepts, ideas, and options

can be understood and related. From here, nascent possibilities could—with some effort to push back on the way things are—be explored in real-world settings and may also be useful in helping to inform work done using either or both of the other two approaches. One benefit of doing this work with a group of deeply experienced experts is that any person can run into a bias, a blind spot, or a third rail that they cannot get past. Here, the group can be more powerful than our lone poet who may not be able to get past some element of their inheritance and find the right word to allow the poem to express something new.

**Taking Notice:** Taking notice begins with recognizing the disconnect between the way our inheritance sets us up to talk about and understand things and the way we experience those things as we are living through them. Doing so invites us to draw on outside sources from marginal traditions (our wider inheritance) to look for marginal meanings, ideas, and concepts that provide a better fit.

A good example is the ongoing proliferation in higher education of all things cross-disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary. Over the past half century, higher education has endeavored to address the demand coming from the sciences as well as employers and governments for students educated to perform at a high level in cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary settings. The promise was that we would teach students effective methods for operating across disciplinary silos. This would allow us to better address major societal challenges such as poverty, climate change, and violence. It would also meet employers' needs for employees who can collaborate creatively, as the locus of wealth creation has shifted from manufacturing to the service industry to interhuman attention. Interdisciplinary generalists were to work alongside disciplinary specialists, and there was to be a science of team science. Knowledge from disparate disciplines was to become integrated.

But despite the ongoing drumbeat of progress, none of this has been realized. The disciplines never opened up spaces for interdisciplinary generalists; indeed, the National Science Foundation ended its interdisciplinary graduate program, the Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship, in large part because its graduates were outcompeted for jobs by students who trained as specialists. Likewise, employers never created generalist positions because there was no supply of effective generalists. The science of team science has not produced anything like a meta-method that, if followed, can produce effective interdisciplinary team science. And while the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies and others have done great work in exposing students to complex and cross-disciplinary problems and settings, it has dropped the term *integrative* from its original name because that term was not an accurate descriptor of what takes place.

Taking notice in this case means reckoning with the discomfort generated by the lack of fit between this ongoing rhetoric and our experience trying to actually engage in interdisciplinary work. In probing this disharmony, taking notice allows us to appeal to traditions outside the mainstream, both to shed light on the issue and to identify potential future possibilities. In this case, it could mean appealing to the work of Ludwik Fleck, Bruno Latour, Annemarie Mol, and others who have recognized how our inherited understanding framed disciplines as “topic areas to which the scientific method is applied,” which allows us to initially treat interdisciplinarity as just another topic area (organized areas of study with tribal languages) instead of seeing that disciplines operate more as regional ontologies (Fleck 1981; Kuhn 2012; Latour and Woolgar 1987; Mol 2003). From that realization, new possibilities for developing cross-disciplinarity that take the ontological nature of disciplines seriously could be developed.<sup>1</sup> In the first essay, we noted that a wide range of twentieth century approaches to critical thought that are commonly taught to undergraduates could serve as potential outside sources, but marginal meanings can come from anywhere outside the dominant meaning framework. There are myriad aspects of higher education to

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1 See, for example, Scharff and Stone 2022 and Stone 2014. By using the term *ontological nature*, we are pointing to the way in which Kuhn and others have shown that through training based in textbooks, exemplars, and the development of skillful practices (all of which Kuhn summarizes under the much-debated term *paradigm*), disciplines create regional ontologies wherein terms mean the way they work in the discipline (this is what is meant by operationalizing a term). Regional ontologies, as such, are closed circles. Efforts at so-called integration fail to reckon sufficiently with this ontological nature.



which the practice of taking notice can be applied, and our convenings will try to identify those that may be most fruitfully carried forward into discussions and experiments regarding higher education's long-term future.

**Retrieval:** The starting point for retrieval is not the past, per se; it is consulting the past in order to better understand something about who we are and then use that to understand what is possible for us moving forward. In the first essay, we referenced Chad Wellmon's account of the rise of the modern research university. To understand how to carry out retrieval, it is useful to begin with one of his key findings to create an example. Wellmon noted that—for the German thinkers working to reinvent the university—this new form of university was “meant to transform students into disciplinary subjects . . . [I]t was a cultural technology that formed people” (Wellmon 2016). We can take this as a starting point for retrieval by recognizing that we—as graduates of modern universities—have been formed into science-minded disciplinary subjects. As a moment of retrieval, we see that this is not meant as a fact about us but as a starting place for us—yet another dimension of our inheritance. And as with experiential self-awareness and taking notice, retrieval asks us to lean into that inheritance—how it sets us up to see, talk, and act around things—to see if it aligns with what we're experiencing and to probe any discomfort that arises.

To take another example from that period, around 1800 as science-mindedness was being floated as a marginal practice that could help rescue higher education, it was perceived as an unalloyed good. But in an age where AI will continue to improve upon many of the intellectual skills and epistemic practices that made a science-minded, disciplinary subject meaningful and valuable, asking questions about how we got here and what other paths may have been and may still be possible seems like a valuable exercise. In another sense, in an age where many of our most important challenges defy being shaped into the kinds of well-formed problems required by method-based, scientific problem-solving, being science-minded disciplinary selves may in fact be an obstacle to responsive action. Consider just this short list of challenges that lack the puzzle-like structure required of well-formed problems: wicked problems, which lack agreement on the nature or even the existence of the problem, its causes, and what would constitute a solution; problems too contextually embedded for any method to solve; problems that call for creative rethinking instead of solutions; and problems that require a kind of collaborative practice that first recontextualizes how we normally understand expertise.<sup>2</sup> Retrieval is working with discomfort in areas such as this by appealing to the past. In so doing, it is also an invitation to go beyond the received view and return to the past's richness, mystery, and sloppiness to see what we can carry forward.

## Conclusion

One might reasonably ask why this extended invitation calls for expertise in higher education if we are not seeking new knowledge about what is actually going on outside right now and how it is likely to change but instead asking people to probe their feelings of discomfort. The answer is that we don't see expertise that way. Expertise is extra-rational. All experts know—from experience—is that expertise goes beyond the application of theory and beyond the skillful use of method (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986,16–51).<sup>3</sup> They also know that they cannot fully explain how they can do what they do; otherwise, they could just tell others how to be experts. This is what makes expertise extra-rational. It is also why interdisciplinary efforts often devolve into debates about the choice of appropriate methods; in group settings, method choices can be rationally justified, but expertise cannot.

From our standpoint, we see that within their domains, experts do three things at a level that nonexperts cannot: they make finer distinctions and richer connections among the meanings that operate in their domain; they

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2 See The Institute for Transformational Education and Responsive Action in a Technoscientific Age (<https://www.iterata.org/getting-to-know-iterata.html>).

3 Following Dreyfus, we use extra-rational deliberately, since it involves having all the knowledge about some sort of situation and having developed the usual skills of competence with regards to handling it and then developing an understanding that goes beyond competence.

are better at discerning what matters and what requires attention from what does not; and they have greater normative sensitivity to what is appropriate and inappropriate within their domain (Wrathall 2019). Experiential self-awareness, taking notice, and retrieval all appeal to these aspects of expertise. Experts in higher education will surface areas and matters of discomfort that the lesser initiated are unlikely to recognize are there. They will be able to probe with fine-grained fidelity the lack of fit between the matter their inheritance sets them up to see, understand, and act on and what their experience of the matter is telling them. They will cast a wider net of connections and relations to marginal meanings, past practices, and outside sources. And they will do this in concert with other experts and without debates about methodological supremacy or epistemic authority.

The long-term future of higher education is neither predetermined nor is it wide open. It is not at the mercy of demographics, technology, or the economy, but it is also not going to be fashioned into something radically unlike its current form. The future is the sum of all the choices we make and don't make along the way—as well as how we understand them and misunderstand them, how well or poorly we implement them, what will interfere with them, and what we come to decide they mean—informed by the inherited tradition we will be creating and by whatever capacity we have developed to see both from our inheritance and beyond it. The goal of this exercise is to add to that stock of choices and create pools of possibilities that will not be available to our future if we simply draw our choices from what the dominant meaning framework at the time provides. To this end, we again invite our readers to reach out to be a part of this much-needed conversation. We hope that the discussion around these critical issues facilitated by ACE is one of many.

We invite readers who are interested in joining such a conversation to contact Lindsey Myers, director and principal program officer, Education Futures Lab, ACE, by emailing [lmyers@acenet.edu](mailto:lmyers@acenet.edu).



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