# Transcript

**Podcast episode 2 – Valerie Hannon says we need to question what learning is for**

Duration 33:23 minutes

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ANGELA SCAFFIDI:

Welcome to the [Bastow](https://www.bastow.vic.edu.au/) podcast – conversations with big thinkers about the big questions in education and leadership today. I’m [Angela Scaffidi](https://senateshj.com/our-people/angela-scaffidi/).

Today, I’m joined by [Valerie Hannon](https://www.innovationunit.org/people/valeriehannon/), who needs very little introduction to all of the folk who are in education.

Valerie Hannon has had a long and varied career in education. She’s worked across the globe as a high school teacher, as a researcher, as a director of education, in various roles in different iterations of the Innovation Unit. She’s been an independent consultant, and an author. She’s a thought leader on creativity and innovation, she’s an expert advisor on education to the OECD, and Valerie is founding partner and co-chair of the Global Education Leaders Partnership.

Welcome Valerie.

So, Valerie, education’s obviously a field that has held your interest. What it is about education that drives and inspires you?

VALERIE HANNON:

I don’t know if you remember that movie ‘Accidental Tourist’. I feel like I’m an ‘accidental educationist’ or initially accidental, anyway.

My own experience of schooling was in a convent. I was 13 years in Catholic convents. And admirable in many ways, though the education that I received was, from nuns who were extraordinarily dedicated and committed women and, in some senses, very important role models, it was very enclosed, and one knew very, very little about the world. I mean, honestly, I came out of school really not knowing what, say, the civil service was or the notion of how one took a route to business. And I really went on to university to study the subjects that I was really good at, which was mathematics and then philosophy. And so, if I tell you that I went into education as a teacher initially really through lack of imagination... Huh! ...and lack of really thinking through what other options there might be, um, that that may be rather disappointing response.

But I have to say things changed, I would guess, in the first sort of eight years of my career – it’s a very long career. Um, because when I started teaching, I think I was pretty much replicating the models, not terribly consciously, but replicating the assumptions and the models around the kind of education that I had, um, which was fundamentally one of transmission of knowledge, an expectation that the teacher was absolutely in control of everything that happened, knew what the outcomes needed to be but in a fine, narrow sense and I think my vision of outcomes then was still academic achievement.

Anyway, thank God, experience is a great teacher and as time went on, I’ve changed. I became acquainted with some extraordinary educators. I’ve been inordinately lucky in my life to have some great tutors. I did a master’s at Manchester University with a guy called David Hargreaves, who many of your listeners will know – an extraordinary thinker.  
But most of all, working with kids in a different capacity and starting to get a real sense of the scope of education to not just change individual lives but its importance in the progress of our societies.

So, it’s been quite a journey for me. I’m grateful to have had it but I think, you know, equipped with different kinds of understandings when I was 18, my life might’ve been very, very different. I don’t regret it at all. I’m so grateful that it’s been as it has, and it feels like, even now, at my extraordinary ripe old age, I’m capable of engaging with people around the world who are trying to create systems for learning which will create change-makers in our world and that’s an immense privilege.

ANGELA:

In the book ‘Thrive’, you argue for a new narrative for education, one that starts with revisiting our concept of what education is in the first place and you’ve started to sort of talk about that. You suggest it’s about learning to thrive in a transforming world. What does the sort of idea of thriving actually mean? What does it look like?

VALERIE:

Well, I was driven to writing a book and to thinking about the question ‘what is learning for?’ out of frustration, in the sense that working, as I’ve said already, in a very privileged system, with many systems around the world, I was really captured by the question or captivated by the question of why is that change is so slow where in almost all our other systems and processes in society the world has changed immensely and education simply has not. I mean, this will be an argument very familiar to most of your listeners, I think. And of course, there have been changes. I mean, it’s absurd to say there have been none. But fundamentally in its routines, in its architecture – I don’t mean its physical architecture, I mean its structuring – education remains not dissimilar to that which was established in mass terms, towards the end of the 19th century.

And so, the question for me was why is change so slow? We get that it’s not meeting our needs and I’m driven to the view that it’s because the underlying purpose of education is not made problematic. We don’t ask the question ‘what’s all this for?’ It seems so self-evident but yet, actually, it isn’t self-evident because the world is transforming.

So what I’ve tried to do in the book is to do two things, really, one, to set up in a very distilled and compressed way and using the best scholarship I was able to lay my hands on, some very…well, some utterly transformative shifts in our world around three areas - one, what’s happening to our globe, to our planet, to our Mother Earth, two, what’s happening in technology and how that’s changing utterly our possibilities and our predicament and then, thirdly, the way in which we, as a species, are now in the business of directing and designing our own evolution.

So, when you start to think about those sort of changes and you ask what is learning for, you’re driven to a very different set of answers. The old answers, the old narrative is so taken for granted people don’t usually refer to it but if you listen and I mean REALLY listen, really listen carefully to what more or less what any politician says about education, they say they invest public dollars in it because it will lead to greater prosperity, i.e. greater GDP, and more jobs, better jobs for everybody. And actually in these days, if you look into those purposes, they are hollow because we can’t carry on just increasing productivity…well, productivity’s fine but increasing consumption, using more resources in a finite world, in a world where resources are not infinite and, moreover, the changes in technology are holding within them immense challenges for the volume of work, the nature of work and the distribution of work.

So, I was driven to thinking that maybe with a different kind of narrative around education we would start to see why it is urgent to start to transform how learning is…I won’t say ‘delivered’ but encountered and made a part of their very being for young people. And I feel like the idea of thriving, the concept of thriving is born from this much more holistic conception that we are part of a bigger thing, a part of bigger systems. It’s more ecosystemic, if you like. We are part of an ecosystem and if we’re happy and content whilst continuing to destroy the earth’s infrastructure and to systematically make extinct something like 50% of other species, then I think that’s a problem.

And so what I put out there for debate was the idea that if we think about our objective being to thrive in these hugely changed circumstances, we can think of our place in a wider ecosystem, think about our thriving, yes, as individuals - of course that’s important - thriving in our relationships, thriving in the societies that we create, what kind of prosperity we want, what kind of equity we want in our societies but also how we contribute to a thriving world, a thriving planet in its environmental sense but also inter-culturally, acquiring the kinds of global competence that I think increasingly, educators are interested in. So, thriving, for me, then has many kind of aspects. It’s more holistic, it makes us think about our place in a bigger picture.

ANGELA:

So clearly, we need to be in a hurry. Clearly, I’m getting a sense, from what you’re talking about there around Thrive and the narrative is we need to hurry. What does a transformed system look like and given we are talking about leadership, what does leadership look like in that system?

VALERIE:

I use the term ‘transformation’ because I’m not just talking about improving the existing school model and I talk about ‘systems’ because around the world and, indeed, in Australia there are alternative models for – I’ll put schools in inverted commas – for ‘schools’ which are doing exactly the kinds of things that I think schools need to do to change.

Again, I’ll say the school that you find generally in our systems has all the routines and the expectations of one created hundreds of years ago, a couple of hundred years ago.

And I often ask myself and ask audiences the question how many of the kids in schools in your system, if two conditions were satisfied, one, that it is was known that they would be safe and, two, it was not mandatory by law, would go to school willingly and with joy, how many of them would rock up? So, the question I think that needs to be posed is how many of those routines and models and the architecture of schooling are really needed for the kind of learning that we need in the 21st century and how many of them are not?

And so, when we think about how learning actually happens for young people, how it’s made relevant, how they are excited by it, how teachers can become modern designers of learning, then you start to get a very different picture. And as I say, there are many environments around the world now who are modelling this so it’s not like it’s all theory and up in the air in La-La Land. People are doing it, but it doesn’t yet characterise our systems. And I think that increasingly we are going to be seeing the design of learning devolve now, down to leaders in their context and in their communities and understanding that there will be differences between them. And it seems to me, since I spent, I don’t know, 20 years of my career in the school improvement movement, much of that school improvement movement actually made schools look more alike. They converged. I believe, as we go forward, that we’re going to be seeing schools evolving very differently in their contexts and their communities, not to say that some will be better, and some will be worse, but they will differ.

And I think this is where school leaders come in, in terms of enabling the contribution of their communities which, by the way, is going to be absolutely fundamental going forward. We can’t see schooling and learning as just the business of the schools but, increasingly, it has to be everybody’s business. It has to be the community’s business, otherwise…well, first of all, we are narrowing our ideas pool and our resources pool and that is partly the reason why so many schools struggle in their communities and find it very, very difficult to get traction because education’s not valued. It’s over there, it’s in this pod, in this enclave called ‘schooling’. And I think it has to be much more widely shared than that.

So, I guess, you could, if I were to capture it, talk more about permeability between the school and its community and the capacity to, as it were, enlist and utilise all the resources that communities have to give and those features need to become systemic, not beautiful exceptions to be found just for the lucky few.

ANGELA:

Valerie, you’ve talked there about some things that school leaders can do within their own context. If listeners are thinking that, “This sounds important. This sounds like work I need to be involved in,” where would an education leader in Australia start? What would be the sort of first steps, in your mind?

VALERIE:

So, I think some of the things that Bastow does, in terms of being a window on the world, are very important. I think the critical feature for education leaders anywhere now is to be learners. It’s kind of a cliché but I really mean that. So they must not, in my view, think they’ve been appointed to a principalship and that’s it, they’re equipped for everything they need but, rather, they need to be outward-facing, outward-looking and really interested, genuinely interested in what colleagues, not just within their state, province, sector or system are doing, or in Australia, but beyond. And I think that a sense of internationalism and looking beyond one’s boundaries, being hungry for stimulus and input are the hallmarks of the great leader. And I think within Australia, things like the Australian Learning Lecture and what emerges from the Australian Learning Lecture, the kinds of things, as I’ve said already, that Bastow are doing, the kinds of things that communities of practice across Australia are doing. I mean, there are a whole range of projects and initiatives in which school leaders working together in communities of practice to start to evolve different models, are going on. So just starting to poke at those and have a look at them would be the first step for a leader but then, after that, I think a great way is to find a way to join with other colleagues who are interested in pursuing this, who are driven to do it and form your own community of practice, hopefully with the support of institutions like Bastow.

ANGELA:

So clearly, Valerie, you’re a lifelong learner and you’re encouraging us to keep learning. I think our listeners would be very interested to know a bit more about who influences your thinking as education leader, maybe now, maybe in the past. But who have been some of the influences for you?

VALERIE:

That’s a good question. I think I’ve already mentioned David Hargreaves – his work was just extraordinary. Obviously, I mean, there have been, in recent years, some really intriguing thinkers. People I work closely with and admire would be Tony Mackay, who chaired AITSL for a number of years, Dion Sal, who’s a radical thinker and a highly provocative one. Huh! Sometimes very difficult to work out what the consequences of his critique are but I love that because he provokes me. I’ve always been interested in Michael Fullan and I think he’s a towering figure in education and his work more latterly I feel more comfortable with because I feel that he’s moved on from the great legacy of his work, which was around the school improvement movement, to thinking about issues around deeper learning.

There is one other person I really ought to mention and that’s Larry Rosenstock, the principal and founder of High Tech High in San Diego, which I’m sure many of your listeners will have encountered, and I think Larry is one of the truly innovative thinkers in education. I don’t think he’s published anything. He’s done various papers, but he hasn’t got a stream of books. What he’s done is devote his life to modelling the kinds of learning institutions that really make…well, which transform lives, absolutely no question. And his other colleague, Dennis Littky, who founded Big Picture Learning. And I profile Big Picture Learning in my book ‘Learning a Living’.

So, all of those things are really important but, truthfully, I have to say that my influences in my own work come from outside of education and I think what I’ve tried to do, really, is pierce the bubble a bit and education’s been such a sort of self-enclosed system. So, I try to read, and bring into the piece writers from economics, from political science. I’ve been very… I’ve been blown away, actually, by the work of Yuval Noah Harari, who wrote ‘Sapiens’ and then ‘Homo Deus’ and his latest book, ‘21 Lessons for the 21st Century’, people, I guess, who try to take a big, synoptic view of what is happening in the world So, I think what I try to do in my work is read very widely and without boundaries and then try to explore, really, how the implications of what I see in that play out for our work in education.

ANGELA:

So, Valerie, you’ve said that learner agency is crucial. Why is that?

VALERIE:

If you look at the history of education and learning, there’s a very close tie-up with what economies need and want and what societies expect and I guess that, in terms of the kind of vocabulary, the kind of expectations we have for learners, I would discern three sort of phases, really - one, when mass education was introduced to feed the industrial revolution. Learners were pretty much expected to be compliant. They needed certain skills, but they needed to comply with what big employers and the stratified, often class-ridden expectations of societies laid down.

I know when I was teaching, when I was learning, we expected compliance of our students and, I have to say, in many schools I see today that is still the case.

I think you can see a second phase, where we have been talking, in the last couple of decades, really, very much more about engagement. We don’t just want compliant learners, we want engaged learners. An engaged learner is really much more alive to and owning their own learning journey, much more receptive, contributing a great deal more, having a voice, that kind of thing. And I think it doesn’t take much to see how that links in with certain societal and industrial and economic changes too.

Where I think we’re into now - and this is why I am working very closely with the OECD on its Education 2030 Project within which learner agency is placed absolutely at the heart of the model - we now see, I think, circumstances in which if young people, indeed, if our planners in our society are to thrive, then they need to be change-makers. We need to change course in all kinds of ways, not least – I haven’t mentioned this but perhaps it’s time to introduce it - across the world, you know, liberal democracies are under threat. A cursory, five-minute glance across what’s happening in the world and the changed forces, nearly to the point where, actually, liberal democracy is at considerable risk and, if you look at the data, many fewer young people think that it’s important to live in democracy. They don’t sort of get why that’s a big deal.

And why would they? Because a number of writers have described the phase we’re in at the moment as ‘democratic disappointment’, that we actually face a situation where people don’t feel, often, that democracy is delivered for them.

So if I just take that particular sliver of human life, young people need these days, I believe, to start to experience and encounter and live their own agency, that is to say their belief in their own self-efficacy and their belief that they can make a difference and that through their own actions, they can not only take control of their own lives and their own journey but impact upon their societies because in doing so, that will be the route to enable them to become change-makers. But also, in terms of political engagement and I mean that with a small ‘p’. I mean by that, young people becoming truly citizens, not just people who know how their institutions work but who are engaged in a form of the recreations, the re-imagination, if you like, of democracy. So, for those reasons, I think we have to think about what learner agency entails and that’s happening in a number of places around the world, it’s happening in some places in Australia. And it’s just so fantastic to learn, through Twitter and other media, how young people in Australia on climate and in, say, the States on gun control, this isn’t all about turning them into activists and demonstrating on the street but it’s about them getting their minds around and understanding the big contemporary issues that actually are going to shape their lives. This is the sense of learner agency is what motivates young people really to acquire the knowledge and skills to engage fully as the citizens we want them to be or they need to be. What we want is going to be irrelevant.

ANGELA:

So how does this change the way we think about the capabilities needed for educational leadership?

VALERIE:

Well, point one, what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander and when we’ve been working on the Education 2030 framework, learning framework at OECD, with huge numbers of educators from around the world - it’s a very co-creative process, including, by the way, teacher unions, representatives - they often say, “Yeah, we buy it. We buy it. We really think learner agency’s terribly important but we need teacher agency too.” So, you can’t expect young people to acquire agency in a system in which teachers don’t experience it and leaders don’t experience it. If they just think they’re cogs in a wheel, it’s not very likely that they’re going to create institutions and learning experiences where young people encounter agency.

So, we’ve been thinking very hard about what teacher agency looks like, what are the limits of professional autonomy and different kinds of accountability – peer accountability, community accountability. And so, to leaders, for a start, leaders need to understand these concepts and why they’re so important, not be threatened by them. Sometimes, learner agency is translated as ‘autonomy’ and it’s not the same thing at all. We’re not talking about autonomy. We can’t create schooling systems where young people experience complete autonomy. We do need to have structures and some expectations and kids don’t know what they don’t know. That’s very clear.

By the way, just in parenthesis here, I do want to say how much of a fan of schools I am. I may not sound it, the way I’ve been talking, but everything I do is driven towards ensuring that schools as institutions survive. I think that schools will be increasingly important in our societies as one of the few spaces where young people come together, encounter folk from outside of their own family environments, are brought to encounter areas of knowledge and experience that otherwise they simply would not and that teachers and leaders as designers of learning experiences are fundamental to that. But all of that being the case and coming back to your question about leader capabilities, so first of all, as I say, the requirement, I believe, for leaders to start to create a different narrative around what education is for. Leaders’ capabilities often refer to storytelling and to creating a big picture. And I think every leader at whatever level is in the business of storytelling and creating a narrative, in addition to all the technical proficiencies which are needed. It may want to draw upon past traditions and, of course, many schools do that, especially schools that have got a long history and a proud tradition. Fine. But that needs to be adapted to and rethought within the conditions of the 21st century. So, the capability of creating a new narrative, both for the internal school community but perhaps even more importantly to the wider community in which schools sit, is really, really important.

And then, I think, that capability – you can call it ‘distributed leadership’ if you like but some of those other terms apply – of empowering colleagues within the school to both take initiative, to demonstrate their own capacity to design powerful learning experiences in colleagueship with others, those seem to me to be the kinds of new dimensions around leader capability that it’s worth touching on here.

ANGELA:

So, if a school leader was listening to this podcast and thought, you know, the idea of creating a narrative would be a powerful thing for them, for their school, for their community, what would be the kinds of questions that they might need to start to answer to sort of begin to create that narrative?

VALERIE:

That’s a great question. Really great question. Where I started - this podcast wouldn’t be a bad idea - what is learning for? What do you really believe in your guts now, that it’s for? And by the way, make sure you’re equipped to answer that question. Are you, as an educated person, really well-read and up to date about the kinds of conditions that your young people will face ‘cause actually that’s your moral responsibility? Your responsibility as a leader is to ask yourself what is that you are preparing these young people for, have you got some kind of grasp of that and if that’s the case, what is your best assessment of how that can be achieved with the help of your system of Victoria.

We’re doing some great thinking around this in various other colleges and institutions. But you as a leader need to equip yourself intellectually, in the first instance, to answer that question ‘what is learning for?’ And, I think, then the question becomes a more contextualised one in your community. What are the big issues confronting the community in which your school sits? How well do you know that community, how well do you reach out to it and the lived lives and experiences of the kids within that community? So those, for me, are the starting points because those are the questions that will form the kind of responses a leader makes to how their school should evolve over time.

ANGELA:

Valerie, you’ve talked about systems being quite slow to adapt. Are there any systems on the right path and what can we learn from them?

VALERIE:

Oh, I think there are. Obviously, I’m deeply inspired by the privilege I have of doing some international work and encountering what’s happening elsewhere and particularly through this OECD work which, as I’ve said, in Education 2030 is bringing together nations who are wanting to accelerate this process of transformation. So, what do I see happening? I see interesting changes more or less everywhere. But the ones that I admire who are making the biggest changes, I would say British Columbia and Canada, particularly around this notion of leader agency and teacher agency, who’ve been doing fantastic work on rethinking what their curriculum is for and how curriculum choices should be structured and doing that in an entirely co-created approach with the profession.

I know this is a cliché and I’m apologising to your listeners but Finland, I’m afraid, just keeps on recreating itself. It’s small, it’s agile but it never rests on its laurels. It knows that it must continue to reassess how effective its education system is for the future and it’s kind of an innovation nation, really, and innovation is part of its DNA.

And part of what the Finnish Board of Education has now done is to create an Innovation Unit which is working with municipalities around the country to solve their intractable problem through thinking ecosystems, frankly, in a nutshell, and I’m terribly impressed by what they’re doing.

I’m afraid I must mention your near neighbour. You may not like to hear this, as Australians, but I do think what the new government in New Zealand is doing, many of you will have heard that the new minister there… Well, ‘new’. What? Two-years old now...has been asking the questions, what kind of systems do we want, what is our New Zealand education system for? So, he’s been convening big summits of people asking that question, a very open website in which people can pour in their thoughts and views about how the system needs to change and they’ve created a series of work streams to make that happen and they think it needs to happen fast.

So, I think those lessons are ones that I know many senior colleagues in Australia are very well aware of and maybe it’s time, you know, to rethink the Melbourne Declaration, for Australia itself to rebrand itself as ‘Education Nation’ with a new and refined, redefined purpose for your education system. I think it would be really timely and my sense is that there are huge numbers of people in Australia who are up for it.

ANGELA:

I love the sound of becoming the ‘Education Nation’. So, any final words, Valerie, for our education leaders in Victoria and Australia and, indeed, if we have any New Zealand educational leaders listening to us?

VALERIE:

I think I’ve set out some ideas about how people might take their work forward. But let me say now that I’ve been inspired by a huge amount from the educators in Australia. So, I guess, my view would be make alliances, reach out across states, start to create a bigger movement for change which puts pressure on both the Federal Government but also states, to adapt the old language, the old metrics, the old assumptions about assessment.

So, I guess, my end point would be create a movement amongst yourselves which will be an unstoppable force for change.

ANGELA:

We will do our best. Valerie, it’s been wonderful speaking with you.

Thank you for listening to the Bastow Educational Leadership podcast. If you’ve enjoyed this conversation, why not tell your friends and colleagues. And join us next time! You’ll find episodes on the Bastow website, and you can listen or subscribe wherever you find your podcasts.