

LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT & THE FUTURE OF WORK

A VISION FOR TOMORROW'S EDUCATION

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At Boston University, she saw first-hand the limitations of a one-size-fits-all educational model. Her vision for the School of Humanity emerged from frustration with the status quo and a fervent belief in the transformative power of interdisciplinary learning, project-based assessments, and a focus on human flourishing. She recounts: "The shift from neuroscience to education entrepreneurship stemmed from my struggles, which intensified in university. The lack of intentionally designed experiences to foster human flourishing, purpose, and well-being fueled my drive to create an alternative. After my last year of studies, I pivoted into the education space."

RAYA BIDSHAHRI

The world is rapidly unfurling into the future. My conversation with Raya Bidshahri, the visionary founder and CEO of the School of Humanity, unveils insights that echo the vibrancy and urgency of shaping tomorrow. Through her voice, this story is a beacon for the curious minds and restless spirits seeking to carve out pathways of innovation and human progress.

My dialogue begins with Raya reminiscing about her childhood curiosity. This is the genesis of a lifelong pursuit to understand and influence the vast expanses beyond our immediate grasp.

"I was very curious, I loved learning, I loved reading," Raya muses. However, her early schooling experiences, marked a profound love for learning, were, paradoxically, marred by the conventional schooling system's inability to quench her thirst for knowledge. She shares: "The experience of being someone who loved learning and not doing well in school was quite confusing because it goes against the perceptions and stereotypes of the kind of human that does well in school. That contradiction in my identity was a very difficult experience for me." This experience shaped her future in untold ways.

The School of Humanity is an American online high school serving learners from over 20 countries across five continents in two cohorts. She recalls: "It all started with an idea. The School of Humanity was founded from a place of inspiration of what education could be."

The school's vision is to create an alternative education system that actually addresses the needs of today's world. "What sets us apart is our departure from traditional subjects in favor of interdisciplinary learning journeys focused on global challenges like future food, energy, and water security," Raya declares. "We eschew traditional exams for project-based assessments, emphasizing real-world application and understanding through a fluid and mastery-based education model centered around global challenges and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Central to our curriculum is the emphasis on human flourishing, incorporating workshops and personalized journeys to develop emotional, existential, and somatic intelligence. Our innovative approach has earned us accolades, doubling our cohorts annually and marking us as an award-winning high school."

I see it as a matter of education versus learning. Education is characterized by its formal, structured approach, encompassing specific methodologies. In contrast, I wonder what the informal, pedagogical strategies Raya and her school employ that seamlessly integrate into and support this framework. She points out that the school's concept isn't the absence of structure but rather



its reinvention. "It's not that there isn't a structure; it's a different structure," she asserts.

Raya acknowledges that young minds need structure, accountability, and discipline, reassuring them that essentials like deadlines and assignments still play a crucial role. However, through the lens of mastery-based pedagogy, the approach diverges from traditional education; it personalizes learning, enabling students to progress at their own pace based on mastery of content rather than a one-size-fits-all timeline. According to her, this fluid, learner-centered model is contrasted with the traditional, educator-led course structure. It also changes how an educator organizes a classroom: "Educators set up mastery groups where people are at different levels, where they might move from one group to the next, very fluidly. The role of an educator is to move around, check on progress, clarify doubts that learners may have, and offer instruction."

Challenge-based learning further exemplifies Raya's innovative teaching structure, where learning is centered around solving real-world problems. She shares an example: "In our pedagogy, we pivot the curriculum around dynamic challenges. Rather than crafting a traditional course, I propose challenges to my learners, like designing space habitats. This process begins with collectively identifying the necessary knowledge, skills, and mindsets - this is our engagement phase. We then explore these challenges, asking questions like how to create oxygen on Mars or ensure astronaut well-being, moving towards crafting solutions.

This approach introduces a distinctive structure, complete with milestones and deadlines, offering a novel solution to traditional systems." This approach undoubtedly fosters a deeper engagement and understanding, moving through phases of engagement, investigation, and application to solve challenges.

What of learners who aren't self-motivated, have ADHD, or are intellectually lazy? Raya's response is illuminating: "Motivation in young minds hinges less on laziness and more on diverse executive functioning and environmental impacts. We stoke intrinsic motivation by linking learning to personal interests and passions, enhancing engagement. Challenge-based learning further motivates by showing the real-world relevance of their studies. Recognizing the role of extrinsic motivation, we introduced structured deadlines after noting its absence affected progress. This balance supports diverse learning needs effectively."

In an evolving education landscape, students are caught between traditional, exam-driven systems and progressive, project-based learning. This duality, especially for young teens, challenges navigating mixed educational messages. Both educators and learners must adapt, harmonizing these contrasting approaches to foster a supportive and coherent learning environment. In her words: "My strategy is to return to first principles thinking: analyzing the core problem and reimagining solutions without bias." Her response to the skepticism and inertia that often accompany systemic change is rooted

in a principle-driven approach to problem-solving and an unshakeable faith in the power of education to address the multifaceted challenges facing humanity.

I'm curious to know if Raya thinks our schools are preparing our youth for the future that's in front of us. She articulates: "I don't believe today's schools adequately prepare learners for the future. By saying that, I don't believe they're preparing them for the needs of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals."

This raises a crucial question: Can teenagers responsibly handle independence, or does equipping them with extensive educational tools risk leading them astray? She asserts: "It depends on the individual. Some are naturally more adept at learning independently, a trait observable even in the workforce, where self-management varies. Consequently, every learner deserves a tailored educational path that aligns with their unique needs for guidance or autonomy."

Given the wealth of knowledge now accessible, especially with tools like ChatGPT, why would someone seek an advanced education when they feel they already possess all the necessary knowledge? Raya responds: "The challenge isn't to motivate individuals but to inspire universities to revamp their curriculums and programs to align with the contemporary world. This shift will attract the next generation."

She emphasizes: "No matter what the challenge in the world is, chances are the solution is somewhere in our education or human development systems."

Her message in a bottle resonates deeply with me: "It is the last lines of a Jalaluddin Rumi poem: 'You are not a drop in the ocean, you are the entire ocean in a drop.'"

As I look back on our conversation, Raya's vision for a future where education serves as the cornerstone of human progress and societal transformation remains a beacon of hope. Her story is not merely a narrative of personal achievement but a testament to the power of innovative thinking and the relentless pursuit of a better tomorrow.

