

Proposing Systemic Changes that Support Holistic-Indigenous Approaches to Education

Robin Ann Martin

E-mail: martinr7@sou.edu

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Abstract

This is a book review of *The Future of Smart: How Our Education System Needs to Change to Help All Young People Thrive*, by Ulcca Joshi Hansen (2021).

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Despite many successes with students, one of the challenges that continues to face holistic educators is how to explain this unique approach to learning and teaching to those who are not familiar with it. Furthermore, we often see that the entire education system needs to be changed, transformed even, in ways to better support holistic models of learning, and we understand intuitively (and sometimes deeply) why that is so. Still, how to propel the transformational movement forward remains an open question.

In her recent book, *The Future of Smart: How Our Education System Needs to Change to Help All Young People Thrive* (2021), Ulcca Joshi Hansen takes on these challenges. Written for a general audience, before the book even begins, there are early endorsements from leaders in a wide array of well-known public initiatives that have crafted programs of a holistic nature. Yet, as I began reading, I wondered: Is she going to tell the story of “holistic-indigenous” approaches to education in a way that can be heard by mainstream educators and changemakers? How will she tell this story in a fresh way? What will be the value of it to those who have been working in the field for decades?

Hansen tells the story slowly, step by step, starting from her own story as a “third-culture kid” of Indian ethnic origin who was raised in Tanzania and moved later to Newark, New Jersey. She writes of her concerns about racism and colorism

that she faced as a child and in raising her own children in a systemically unfair system, her own experiences with students who were learning with the odds stacked against them, students who didn’t fit into the boxes for which mainstream education is designed.

From a one-on-one interview with Hansen, before writing this review, I discovered why the book felt more like an experience than reading a book: it was by intentional design. Hansen worked carefully to write the book so that it would feel like an experience, creating the chapters in layers that go from right-brain thinking, to left-brain detail, and back to the right-brain big picture overview again, all by design. The writing process itself was a holistic, relational journey for Hansen as well, including the challenge of finding a publisher. Now, as the Chief Program Officer at Grantmakers for Education, Hansen is going beyond the book to a series of podcasts by the same title, *The Future of Smart*, with interviews of leaders in education and philanthropy about transformative approaches for shifting the conversations of how we even talk about education and its outcomes. This review, though, will stay focused on the book itself.

From Chapter 1 onward, Hansen tells the story of the two systems of education: the dominating one that emerged over 500 years ago with the “rise of the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview” and a much smaller yet

needed emerging system which she is careful to consider how to label it at all. Her storytelling includes her own process in finding the most appropriate words to show the significance of the “holistic-indigenous worldview” and its embedded ecological values. She shows how this worldview melds with human-centered/liberatory approaches and holistic-indigenous learning (for which she uses the acronym of “HIL”). Overall, the early chapters point readers to deepening our historic understanding of why these worldviews are fundamentally so different.

Throughout the book, Hansen weaves her discourse around HIL examples of schools and education programs, and how the many programs already established can be seeds for more systemic change in the wider system. This goes beyond her initial doctoral research completed almost 20 years ago (at the University of Oxford) to include the stories of many other programs that she has since investigated and visited, as she moves on to examine the possibilities for the broader system of American public education too.

Having completed my own doctoral research in the field of Holistic Education in 2003, I recognized many authors established in the field whom Hansen uses as references to build her arguments. Though, as I hadn’t initially heard of Hansen at all, I was still skeptical about how she was conceptualizing the “holistic-indigenous worldview” until I came to the chapter that introduces explicit approaches to learning at three distinct schools in England: one emerging independent model, one Waldorf model, and one founded by J. Krishnamurti. In the early 2000s, she had studied these three distinct schools that all support students from diverse backgrounds. She introduces each in terms of struggles and key features. Her well-crafted summaries tease out important details of these unique learning communities that can, and do, help young people to thrive by the ways in which they are structured and facilitated. One of the three initial examples also illustrates how the discourse and the practice of holistic education can clash when the school intentionally moves outside of pre-set curriculum while its leader holds ideals beyond his capacities for guiding teachers.

Hansen is careful to point out the importance of individual mindset transformations AND system transformation, and to show how both are necessary. Her focus, however, throughout the book is on how the education system can be transformed and not individual transformation.

In Parts 2 and 3 of *The Future of Smart*, she guides readers to looking at the present education system and then onward to what we might see in the future. By comparing three instructional models/orientations, it becomes clear why the conventional orientation fails so many students; schools

with “whole-child/innovative reform” orientations are important for demonstrating success in character development, social-emotional learning, and community relationships, yet they do not go far enough. According to Hansen, the second model (that is now common in many schools) illustrates “efforts to address the shortcomings of conventional schools without fundamentally abandoning the industrial model. They attempted to mitigate the shortcomings of conventional schools by bolting on solutions wherever they can” (2021, p. 154). She describes the innovative-reform schools as “being caught between worldviews...still largely driven by the teacher rather than emerging organically from students’ interests” (pp. 156-157).

All of this sets the stage for presenting the third instructional model as the one that truly supports all students to thrive: a system of schools / programs (not necessarily bound any longer by geography) that support interdisciplinary learning and that allows students to integrate a sense of community connectedness, relevance, and purpose across core academics, non-core curriculum, and cognitive skills. She gives further examples of schools and K-12 programs that provide creative spaces and opportunities for students to develop independence, a sense of belonging to their community, and a healthy identity.

In the final chapter of the book, she uses the sociological concept of “diffusion of innovations theory” to propose how current models could be used to “leapfrog into a new nationwide vision of teaching and learning” (p. 181). In this discussion, she shows awareness of the complex yet undeniable need to revamp the infrastructure, and that there may be reluctance to do this at first. Rather than stopping here, though, Hansen optimistically goes on to propose “An Emergent Theory of Change” with two non-linear phases. Phase 1 embodies specific steps for “creating the conditions for change,” beginning with conversations with those who have already internalized HIL worldviews and moving on through structural changes of codifying and disseminating existing models, and developing new accountability systems, among other elements. Here, she gives examples of nationwide programs that already exist (in other countries) for more flexible systems of accountability that better align with HIL, along with examples of new programs that bi-pass the old academic-only-focused ACT/SAT as pathways of transitioning to post-secondary pathways.

Remaining consistent in her theory of change, Phase 2 also describes a non-linear approach to progress that will connect system leaders. At this point, she provides several state-level examples of programs that are already facilitating

such connections, even as they intentionally blur the lines between school and community: Big Picture Learning's ImBlaze System, the non-profit CommunityShare, Remake Learning in Pittsburgh, and Reschool Colorado.

Most surprising about *The Future of Smart* is that after many years of exploring, investigating, and inquiring into different models and approaches to holistic education, Hansen gives me more hope about the nationwide system of education than I've felt for a long while. It shows more systems-level change that is already in place than I realized and brings together a plethora of evidence about HIL programs and changing worldviews in a way that highlights real possibilities.

The book is much easier to read than most academic research articles, and it covers many historical and philosophical foundations that are critical for examining necessary changes to our education system. One confusion that exists is in the terminology between worldviews, orientations, and models, but that is a mirror of the education field at large and she is intentionally covering a wide range of related topics.

Lastly, there are extra visuals throughout the book, along with thought-provoking application questions at the end of every chapter, that could make *The Future of Smart* an excellent discussion tool for any school/learning community or school district that is delving into new strategies for system-level changes for supporting holistic-indigenous learning. It would also make a nice book for university courses on the philosophy of education or educational systems.

Reference

Hansen, U. J. (2021). *The Future of Smart: How our Education System Needs to Change to Help All Young People Thrive*. Capucia, LLC.

Acknowledgement

Dr. Robin Ann Martin serves as an instructor at Southern Oregon University. She has a long-standing interest in holistic education, and most recently worked for 3 years at Roong Aroon School in Bangkok, Thailand. From 2006 to 2018, she worked with teacher training and education programs in universities and schools in The Sultanate of Oman, Turkey, and Malaysia.