

“Lessons Earned” Podcast Strada Education Network

S. 3, E. 3: Michelle Weise
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TRANSCRIPT

Host Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network

Hi, I'm Ben Wildavsky.

Host Aimée Eubanks Davis, Braven

And I'm Aimée Eubanks Davis.

Ben Wildavsky: And this is “Lessons Earned.”

Aimée Eubanks Davis: Today, author Michelle Weise.

Voice clip

Michelle Weise [00:00:09] It's so hard for people to cross industry domains and change jobs, so how in the world are we going to do so many more of these over that longer work life? And I think that's when it becomes clear, we've got to get moving now to build the foundation for that future.

Ben Wildavsky [00:00:28] From Strada Education Network, welcome to “Lessons Earned: Putting Education to Work.”

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:00:43] You know, Ben, when you hear people talking about the future of work, the conversation almost always revolves around these really big abstract questions. And the one you hear all the time is, are robots going to take over all of our jobs?

Ben Wildavsky [00:00:59] Yeah. And, you know, those are interesting questions to ponder. But Michelle Weise thinks it's a lot more complicated than that. She argues that we have to start thinking about the possibility that we'll be working for 75 or even 100 years. And sure, you know, robots and AI certainly factor into her analysis, but she's also asking more fundamental questions like, will there still be value in a four-year degree? What kind of supports do people need if they're going to make 20 career pivots over the course of their lifetime? And what kind of essential skills will the workers of the future really have to have?

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:01:37] So for her new book, “Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs That Don't Even Exist Yet,” Michelle and her team sat down for more than 100 hour-long interviews with adult workers. And through those interviews and her research at Strada, she's got a pretty good idea of what the future might look like and what we need to be doing right now if we want to be ready for that future.

Ben Wildavsky [00:02:01] And as you mentioned, Aimée, Michelle and I used to be colleagues. She was the chief innovation officer of Strada's Institute for the Future of Work. And even before we worked together, we would have these really great

conversations about just these kinds of questions. She really is one of the brightest minds in this area, and we're excited to have her on the podcast. Here's Michelle Weise.

(Music)

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:02:30] Before you even get into the future of work, Michelle, I was so struck by so much of what you had to say about the number of years we ought to be working.

[00:02:40] I was like, oh, I don't know if I'm up for that, but I would love to hear about the future. Before we even talk about the future work, I'd love to hear about the future. What do you think our role will look like in 50 to 100 years?

Michelle Weise [00:02:55] Yeah, I enjoy sort of reading what futurists have to say about the future just because it's pretty much mind blowing.

[00:03:04] You know, there are some folks who are predicting that the first people to live to be 150 years old have already been born. And that has always, just kind of I mean, it's just kind of unfathomable because it really snaps everything into attention, because we know that our lives are extending in the workforce already, right? People are staying in the workforce well into their sixties and seventies. But the idea of even a 100-year life regularly lived, 100-year life for 150-year life, you suddenly start to think, Oh, my gosh, does that mean I don't have to work for 60 or 80, 100 years? Right? It just, it's unfathomable. And then on top of that, you realize how in the world will I be able to sustain that longer, more, you know, more challenging work life because of all these changing technologies and needs in the workforce. How am I going to be able to sustain that with just a two- or four-year degree on the front end of that longer life? And so I've just always found that touching, really interesting mental model.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:04:17] Oh, yeah. I mean, I have to say, I mean, that's not a slight expansion. I mean, you're talking about 150 years. You know, how in the world would we start thinking about careers from a 100-year span in time?

[00:04:30] And I have to say, to be frank, I don't want to work for 100 years.

Michelle Weise [00:04:35] Yeah. And that's the, you know, your reaction is, I think, the same as mine as everyone else is. It's, Oh, my gosh, I don't want to work that long. How is this going to work? And that's the thing when it comes to so much about the future of work. As I've been diving into the literature, it's so easy to get down and kind of depressed and sort of scared and paralyzed about this future ahead. But there are really interesting ways to think about, you know, even if you just look at today, if you look at the retirement of early baby boomers, they're already experiencing 12 different job changes by the time they retire.

[00:05:19] So it's easy to extrapolate to 20 or even 30, right? And the thing that really kind of brings the urgency now into the present moment is, even if we have to think about 12, 20, 30 job transitions, it is such a difficult process to navigate today. Like we don't, like, the idea of a career pivot is, it's almost mythical, right? Because it's so hard for people to do. It's so hard for people to cross industry domains and change jobs and, you know, even move from sales and marketing or even with an advanced degree move from one industry to another. So how in the world are we going to do so many more of these over that longer

work life? And I think that's when it becomes clear, we've got to get moving now to build the foundation for that future.

Ben Wildavsky [00:06:09] Well, OK, so let's say I, I take a really deep breath and I think, OK, 100-year career, maybe it's not me, maybe it's my kids, maybe it's my grandkids. All those pivots that you're talking about, what's actually going to make somebody a good worker in the future?

Michelle Weise [00:06:23] Yeah, I think, you know, if you had asked folks maybe eight years ago, say, like when the MOOC craze was happening, the massive open online courses, you know, I think at that moment people would have said, Oh, there's a huge STEM shortage and we all need much stronger technology, technical skills for the future. And we need, you know, more engineering, more math, more science, all of these things. But now that conversation has really evolved. And if you look at, you know, prognostications from the World Economic Forum or McKinsey Global Institute or Brookings, they're all kind of saying the same thing, which is that in some way, yes, we will need enough technical skills to be dangerous. But in more important ways, we're going to need these broader, you know, human skills that help us compete with and coordinate better with all of these different kinds of machines and machine learning and robots. And so it's really not either/or. It's this kind of both, and we need broad-based human skills, like emotional intelligence and judgment and systems thinking to then marry that with a little bit of some of that vertical expertise.

Ben Wildavsky [00:07:46] Sure. Well, but are you saying that that's not the kind of worker that we're cultivating right now? Like, how is the current system failing us?

Michelle Weise [00:07:53] Yeah, I don't think it is what we are doing today. And part of it is, you know, there's just, it's not that there's not a willingness to adapt to, you know, an ever evolving economy. It's just that there's a tremendous amount of inertia in the system and there's just a lot of things that don't work in both our education and workforce training sides, as well as the way in which employers tend to hire job seekers.

[00:08:20] But I think the biggest way to think about it is, in general, most employers — and this is clear from just the demand signal in job postings data — they really do want these very specific human skills. Like, they are looking for great communicators, great critical thinkers. But what they really want are folks who can come into a deeply ambiguous situation and exercise some judgment and creativity and curiosity and critical thinking, right? That would be kind of the ideal learner. And instead, what we do today is we teach all our learners to solve a problem within a specific discipline. We are not great at teaching what you know, author David Epstein calls “range,” like we're just not good at teaching them how they can take things that really seem unrelated but help you actually solve the problem in front of you. And so that's where I really think the open opportunity is for universities. And, you know, especially in this moment where many of them are going to have to dramatically transform how they deliver education just to survive. But this to me is the real opportunity: How do you truly teach interdisciplinary thinking? Because every problem we are going to have to solve in the future is going to be messy and wicked and challenging. And so how do we cultivate that kind of nimble, agile thinker?

Ben Wildavsky [00:10:02] Well, Michelle, you mentioned that a four-year undergrad degree at the start of 100-year career is not going to be sufficient. And, you know, this kind of goes back to something you and I feel like we've talked about so many times when we

were colleagues. Does that mean that the traditional four-year undergraduate degree is just going the way of the dodo?

Michelle Weise [00:10:21] Yeah, I think what you know, what's long been in the ether is this idea that content is no longer king. Right? It's with advanced technology that anyone can look up on the phone in their pockets, what value is there to, you know, leveraging a system that is about disseminating information rather than the application of and the doing and turning all of that knowledge into action? Right? And so that I think, you know, some universities are really meeting the moment and starting to integrate design thinking into their curricula and thinking about learning with purpose. Right? And things that are about problem-based learning and grand challenges and getting people excited to solve problems as opposed to worrying so much about majoring in a specific discipline. But there are few and far between, you know, and I think that those are the signals we need to pay attention to the groups that are starting to move in that direction. And those are the ones that give me hope for the future. I just, I just wish it was more systematic, you know, in terms of being more widespread and easily something that you could, that anyone could find in their curricula.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:11:40] It's just really fascinating to hear you talk about in that way. You know, when I think about my future self in this new ecosystem, you talk about really having a new ecosystem of learning that we need to have. And it's such an ambitious vision. So if I'm really going to imagine my own hypothetical 100-year career, let's say it's the year 2075 and I've just finished high school, so something like, you know, come back as my younger self.

[00:12:09] Now what? Am I going to a four-year college? A two-year college? Am I getting a certificate or stackable certificates? Can you just talk us through what my learning might look like?

Michelle Weise [00:12:20] Yeah, well, ideally in that future, the entire onus of navigating that future ahead of you is not solely on you, which is what is happening today, right? The risk is that everything rests on the individual to figure out nothing is set up in a way that makes it easily navigable. You don't have someone to call. There's no trusted adviser you can turn to for good, solid advice. Right? And so ideally, within that system, there will be better ways of assessing who you are now, what kind of skills you bring to the table, what sorts of hidden skills might you have, because maybe as that, what are you, 17 at that time?

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:13:08] Yes, I'm 17.

Michelle Weise [00:13:15] Maybe, as a 17-year-old, you've had an elderly grandparent in your family who's been suffering from Alzheimer's living with you, and you've been a caregiver for that elderly grandparent. And ideally, there's an assessment that can also surface these hidden competencies within you — right? — that you bring in that are really deeply valuable and transferable. So these assessments of the future need to help us better understand what is truly portable. What can we have now that we can pour over into, say, an array of five or 10 pathways that maybe we never even imagined for ourselves? It's really difficult for folks to imagine and envision a future for themselves. It's very hard for them to think about wholly different things than they ever thought possible. Right? And so the assessments of the future need to help us dream a little bit and get us excited about pathways we maybe never, never really considered. And do the short-burst, six-month program where I can also do an apprenticeship and work with an employer who

I think I want to work for, but I'm not sure. Right? The ability to sort of test out in slightly more low-stakes environments where you can see if this is really the direction you want to go and understand and very transparent ways how you then navigate a way forward. So even if you took, say, something that was more like an immersive boot camp or on-ramp model and you don't have a degree yet, it becomes very clear how you then acquire a different kind of learning experience and add that to what you have. And that's going to maybe later stack into a degree. None of that is clear today. You know, we love talking about microcredentials and stackable credentials, but none of this actually works in a way that is truly comprehensible and navigable and transparent.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:15:21] Yeah, Michelle, I'm just curious, do you at all fear that these various pathways of the future could become stratified? Not that we are not already, don't have present-day stratified pathways, where you just only see upper middle class kids continuing to do the four-year degree, for example, or the undergraduate degree and going to grad school and everyone else will be doing microcredentials or bootcamps like, what do you think about that?

Michelle Weise [00:15:48] Yeah, I mean, you guys have had Tony Carnevale on your show.

[00:15:54] He talks frequently about how the system is so deeply stratified as it is now, the way that we channel white students into the top 300 schools in the country and the rest of the Black and brown communities kind of move into the open-access, for-profit universities. Right? These are, this is just the way we are set up. So the idea that somehow it's going to get worse. We just have to acknowledge that we're already in a terrible, terrible situation.

[00:16:22] And there's not necessarily a way of getting those folks back right now with our traditional, with what we offer today for people who've had a bad educational experience. It's really hard for them to want to go back and get more of a beating. Right? And more, and further be punished with some student loan debt. And again, as I mentioned before, prior to COVID, we had a huge amount of folks in that population. We had over 40 million people who were not planning on coming back to higher ed. So what is the way that we can get them what they need in order to do better in the labor market and gain some sort of social and economic mobility? That's the first piece, like, when we talk to these adult learners. Yes, they would love to have a degree and they see how employers deeply value the degree, but they also are struggling to just survive. So many of them talked about hustle, they kept talking about hustle to survive, and when you hear what they're juggling all at the same time, you know, the two- or four-year program just seems like a bridge too far. Took one of our interviewees close to 20 years to complete a degree. That's not a viable proposition for most folks. So what is it that we can do in the near term to give them these short-burst training programs and relieve them of that, just being in that mode of survival?

[00:18:02] To me, that's the critical piece at this moment.

Ben Wildavsky [00:18:12] But look, you know, as a guy of a certain age, I cannot help keep on reflecting on your 100-year work life. And I want to come back to something you write in the book and you say that in a 100-year work life, we may find ourselves in a state of continuous pivots. Twenty to 30 job transitions might become the new normal. And I wonder how we square that with our understanding of human cognition and how that changes with age. You know, there's an article that Arthur Brooks wrote in "The Atlantic"

last year. He talks about fluid and crystallized intelligence, and he says our fluid intelligence, which is our ability to reason to solve new problems, that this kind of peaks in our 20s or 30s. So on paper, you know, it sounds great to pivot and learn new skills in your 60s or 70s, but the reality is that might be hard to do. So I'm wondering how that factors into your thinking.

Michelle Weise [00:19:04] Yeah, I love that piece that he wrote. There's a real opportunity as we think about a longer work life to to move beyond full time employment opportunities. Right. And think about dips in and out where perhaps some of our older workers are helping younger workers build their social capital. So there's different kinds of ways to think about flexibility of models. And I think that really also means that we have to start figuring out how we think about benefits that are not always tied to a full-time employer. We just haven't, we haven't figured that piece out. In terms of being able to stay competitive within the workforce, again, I come back to this idea that there is this increased demand for these human skills. And what's really important here is human skills, like it sounds great that the work of the future demands uniquely human skills out of us. Right? And that's great because we're human. But what's also amazing is we are not actually great and adept and sophisticated in our human skills. Just think about all the friction that occurs within the workforce. Right? And within the workplace. We are not great communicators.

[00:20:27] We are not, we don't take feedback well or give feedback well. All these different things require practice and some of that comes with time. And so, again, there's this really interesting demand. Right? As we think about the demand going up for these skills, where will we actually find them and how do we practice them? So there are opportunities to think about, I think, that piece as well. And then there's also one other element of this, which I don't think I ended up, I did a ton of research on this, I don't think it ended up making its way into the book as much. But it's this idea of unlearning. Part of the work ahead as we think about that longer work life is, for older generations of workers, it also requires that you have to unlearn some bad habits or unlearn some ways of thinking, and that is also something we don't really teach our folks how to do.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:21:29] Yeah, I mean, Michelle, you're talking a lot about big ideas and really, in my opinion, sweeping changes. And I would love to hear what your advice is for students right now.

[00:21:43] You know, the students who are sitting in our country in the middle of a pandemic that has now caused a recession, maybe even a great recession or maybe even a depression.

[00:21:56] I'm just super curious about, you know, what advice you would give this group of students as an expert on the future of work.

Michelle Weise [00:22:03] Yeah, it's actually a question I was wrestling with with one of my nieces about a month ago who's maybe a junior in high school and had already kind of made up her mind on going into psychology as a major. And I just sort of immediately just said, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. You know, you don't need to make ...

Aimée Eubanks Davis: You sound like the mama aunt.

Ben Wildavsky [00:22:30] Are you the fun aunt or the killjoy aunt?

Michelle Weise [00:22:34] You know, like, I know I'm a total killjoy, but I just said, you know, I don't think you need to make that decision right now. And I was trying to just sort of help her understand how much majors matter. Ultimately, like that choice that you make really does have a significant impact, unfortunately, in the way that our current system works. And the reason why I'm a total killjoy is we had done this research a couple of years ago back with Burning Glass on underemployment. And what was scary was 43 percent of folks started off underemployed. So these were newly minted bachelor's grads going into jobs that really didn't require that that credential and that challenge of actually being appropriately employed at something at their level persisted five and 10 years out. And it was this really difficult rut to get out of. And so that's what I worry about when, not that I want someone to make a decision 100 percent based on their earnings outcome, but they also need to understand the implications of their choices. Right? And this is also fascinating because some people are driven by purpose, which is amazing. Right? And it's when you look at the satisfaction data, you know, that Strada has, around people who major in education, even though they're not making money, they're deeply satisfied with their choices. Right? And there's a lot of people who go into social work with that same kind of sense of purpose. And they're not making much. But I think it's important for a learner to understand, hey, if you do choose psychology, just know that your average earnings are going to be maybe \$42,000 a year. And are you actually going to be able to pay back your student loans? And did you know that in order to make that degree make more sense in the labor market, you have to go to graduate school? Like, you can't just become a therapist? I think there's this idea that if I love talking to people, I love listening to people, I think I would make a great therapist. If you want to do that, you also need, sometimes, an advanced degree to engage in that clinical mode. And so I think these are the things that as long as people are just aware of and can make that better-informed decision, that's what — not that I want to dissuade anyone. I'm someone who used to be an English professor, you know.

So I, you know, it's important to pursue your passions and it matters a whole lot. But it's also, I wish I had just known more. I wish I hadn't been given bad advice like I had been.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:25:31] Yeah, well, I mean, you're really pointing to how, you know, that age old saying, knowledge is power, and how important it is for this group of young people at this moment in time and in the future when they're going to have to work for 100 years, to really be knowledgeable about the choices that they're making. You know, we know that you've spent the last couple of years really thinking about the next 100. And after spending so much time in that space, are you optimistic about the future?

Michelle Weise [00:26:00] Yeah, I am. And I hope that came out through the book. That was really important for me to think about a bright vision for the future. I think it's important to cast the problems in a realistic light. But it's even more important to me, being in this innovation space, to be able to say, Look, there's so much amazing stuff happening. There are these seeds of innovation that are being planted everywhere. The challenge for us is to actually change our behavior and not always be working in parallel with one another or in silos. Like, how do we break down those silos and actually start working across these different stakeholder groups so that job seekers have a much easier time in the future. So I am deeply positive about, even this pandemic has shown us that there's a different kind of coalition-building work going on. I think there's a lot of folks who have been parts of these different conversations over the last few decades and they haven't seen anything really come out of them. And I think that's changing where people are realizing we actually have to do something now. The situation is so challenging that we cannot just sit by and keep talking about it and admiring the problem.

Ben Wildavsky [00:27:21] That was our interview with Michelle Weise. See you next time Aimée.

Aimée Eubanks Davis: See you next time, Ben.

(voiceover)

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