

Providing a Human-Centered, Self-Actualizing Education to Every Student

Michael and Diane sit down with Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman, a cognitive scientist, researcher, professor, and author focused on intelligence, creativity, and human potential. They discuss the importance of placing all students - not just those that are in gifted or special education programs - at the center of their learning. They also apply nuance to popular concepts in education psychology, consider how intelligence became taboo, and illustrate the importance of seeing the middle way and other sides of the issues.

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Diane Tavenner:

Hey, Michael.

Michael Horn:

Hey, Diane.

Diane Tavenner:

I missed you a lot last episode. It's good to have you back, and I appreciate that you continue to carry and balance a lot, so it's good to be here with you.

Michael Horn:

Yeah, it's good to be back in conversation with you. I was really sad to miss the last conversation for multiple reasons, but this conversation was one I was really excited to be in, and so I did not want to miss it. And it's also good to be back in a routine, because routines are important, but this conversation in particular, I think, is going to be really stimulating.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, routines are so important. One of the many things I learned from my undergraduate degree in psychology, which is in many ways the foundation for how I think about learning and teaching and education. And so today, I am equally excited for the conversation we're going to have with one of my favorite psychologists in the world, Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman. In addition to authoring nearly a dozen books and writing a really insightful and useful newsletter that I would recommend to everyone, he hosts the most popular psychology podcast called the Psychology Podcast, and he's the founder of the Center for Human Potential, which says a lot about who he is and what he believes in. And they offer courses and opportunities to learn self-actualization coaching, which is something I'm sure we'll get into in a few minutes, what that means and why it's important. I could go on and on about Scott's resume, but I want to actually get in and talk with him. So let me just say, what's important for me, beyond all of that, is just his care and focus on doing work that actually impacts people's lives and is meaningful and relevant, and in particular in schools and with young people. And so that is where we connected over a decade ago, I think, or somewhere around there.

Diane Tavenner:

And his work has deeply influenced me and my work. So super grateful to have him here. And I know, Michael, you feel equally strong.

Michael Horn:

Yeah. Well, Scott, I won't keep singing your praises too long, but I want to do a little bit more adulation, because among all the things that Diane just mentioned, I also appreciate how, in social media, you are able to strike a nuanced balance in a medium that does not appreciate nuance, and yet you're able to be popular still. And that's something we care about deeply in this conversation. Like Diane and I are always trying to find the nuance. We're always trying to find third ways between polarized viewpoints. And I know we're going to tackle some big topics today in not nearly the time that they deserve, from self-actualization to growth mindset to intelligence. But I just always appreciate how you tackle these topics, and you move beyond the average into the nuance so seamlessly. So, Scott, I will stop being a total fanboy, but just really excited to see you guys.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

It is such an honor to be here. I love you guys, and I feel like I need to invite you two on my podcast someday.

Diane Tavenner:

Well, we're happy to do that. And so let's open the conversation with something that I love, which is, you wrote a manifesto. I think a lot of people think about writing a manifesto, but you actually wrote one. This isn't just any manifesto. It's a manifesto on human-centered education.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Yeah.

Diane Tavenner:

And so let's just start there. Tell us about your beliefs, which I think really go to the core of what is the purpose of education, which is something Michael and I talk about all the time.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Yeah. Thank you so much for bringing that up. I think I'm unwaveringly humanistic in my, like, I really am unflappable about this. All around me, I'll see non humanistic approaches, and I just try not to get caught up in the vortex of those tsunamis. I stay in my own path. I really believe firmly that all students should be treated as human first. And it's a very simple principle that has very deep implications. Yet it is mind-bogglingly not the central principle of education. There's such a focus on results first, or whatever it be now. It's not SAT now because SAT has been banned everywhere. But they're still thinking about, well, what other results should we look to? It's still results focused in a sort of standardized way. They just move the goalpost from one standardized goalpost to another, to come up with a metaphor that doesn't make any sense. But anyway, you knew what I meant. So I just think that that frustrates me, because I think there's so much greater potential that students have. They can display to us if we treat them as a whole person and we view sort of a needs-based approach where we recognize that to be human comes with certain basic needs as well as growth needs. I don't think either security needs or growth needs are being met in schools. And then it is a legitimate question, what should be in the purview of education. And I think that's an interesting question, too, but I would argue the human part belongs, somewhat at least.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, I think Michael's going to take us more in that direction in a moment. But before we go there, is it useful to just sort of define self-actualization. Like, what does that mean to you? And how should we...And I know you have a beautiful metaphor that you use, but I think that would be helpful to folks.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Oh, sure. Absolutely. So there are other buzzwords that are popular these days, like happiness and achievement are the two biggest ones I see over and over again in the education world. But I think self-actualization has a different flavor. It sort of vibrates on a different frequency than either happiness or achievement. It's something else. It's not a word that's used much these days. It was used a lot in the pot-smoking sixties. And I'm trying to put it on a scientific foundation for anyone who will listen to me. I'm trying to put it on the science of self-actualization. And show that we can measure certain characteristics that bring us closer to realizing the best within us, sort of our highest potential, our unique creative potential. And that's really all. I think of it as. What is your unique creative contribution or unique creative potential? It's not as flowery and spiritual sounding as it sounds. That's all I mean, and that is something different, though, than happiness and achievement. You can actually be realizing your unique creative potential. And have a lot of meaning in your life, but not particularly feel happy a lot. And we need to teach people that's okay. You know, we have a lot of young people who are obsessed with just feeling good all the time and are colossal assholes to know.

Michael Horn:

No, but it's so interesting to hear you say that, Scott. And your writing on this has been so foundational to my thinking about it. And I'd love you to just translate that, because I think you gave a good overview of sort of what not to optimize for in education. And maybe started to hint at, you know, if we're thinking about the unique contributions of each individual as a human being. So, what, in your mind, might that look like from the experiences? And we can stay broad strokes, but just thinking about young kids in elementary school through middle and high school, I imagine it changes over time. What are the sorts of experiences that you think school ought to have for students?

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Yeah, great question. So I come at a lot of this through the pathway of trying to reconceptualize gifted education and special education. So let me just say my roots in this. My first book over a decade ago was called *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined*. Where I argued for reconceptualization of human intelligence. I called it the theory of personal intelligence. Now I'm calling it the theory of self-actualizing intelligence because that's more in line with everything I'm doing right

now. But that's really what I was arguing for, was saying, like, look, we treat these gifted kids as though they're the only ones capable or not they're capable. They're the only ones who would benefit from enrichment. It's like, what? A lot of them aren't even benefiting from whatever the "enrichment" they're giving in gifted education classes, which is nothing very valuable to even the gifted kids. But I really think that there's also this false dichotomy we have that you're either learning disabled on one hand or gifted on the other hand, or you're in this third category, mainstream education, where you're just supposed to fly by the seat of your pants. That's it. You got nothing special, you got no excuses. I think that's just like, wow, what a weird system we have in K-12, where that's the way the world looks. And I really believe, in terms of experiences, I think we can democratize a lot of the spirit of how we treat gifted kids, but democratize that towards everyone. But we view it through the lens not of achievement. We view gifted kids as though their goal is to then go out and create Facebook, like that's their only purpose, or to get in Harvard and then pay back the endowment someday. But I feel like people are worth more than that as humans. And democratizing gifted education in a way where the lens of self-actualization for everyone, I think, just completely changes the goalpost, because every student viewed through the lens of self-actualization, you'd treat them the same way in terms of experiences. Maybe the experience would be different, but in terms of the sort of flavor of the experience is that we try to emphasize project-based learning. I mean, this is...Diane's, no stranger to a lot of the experiences I'm going to mention right now, being a legend when it comes to creating just these kinds of experiences. I remember when Diane gave me a tutorial in the Facebook headquarters. I don't know if I'm allowed to say that. I don't know if that was like a top-secret meeting, but you can edit that out if I wasn't allowed to say that. But just individualizing things - in a way where this may sound a little "woo-woo" - but honoring the sacredness of each child's unique self-actualization journey is something really special. And why do we only honor that if you're, quote, gifted, and then we don't even really honor that. What we do is we put so much pressure on you to perform and be gifted. "Oh, you're gifted now be gifted." And then a lot of these...Then there's a whole field of gifted education on underachieving gifted students, which I think is a ridiculous term in itself. I've argued that we need to get rid of the word underachieving because then that implies that there are ungifted kids who are overachieving. And I'm like, what the hell does that mean? Biological opposites. There's just so much. I don't know. I feel like I'm a little quirky. I'm a little odd. I just see things differently. But this is just the way I see it. It's ridiculous the kind of system we set up. And I do think we can create experiences that give a vitality or an aliveness not just to school but to life.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah. So much of what you're saying, Scott. I think, I'm sure people who know what we talk about and are connecting that to the work that I do, they'll see it in what you're saying. We use some different words. We use personalization and things like that. But this idea that each

individual human has their own, they're a unique human that will develop into this world. And if we help them develop, they're going to make a contribution. And none of us know what that is. And it will be very, if we do it well, it will be widely varied. Right. And that's the beauty of the world and the human experience. Another thing that I incorporate a lot into my work - or have over the years - is this idea of growth mindset and this concept. And you've done some really fascinating interviews recently with Carol Dweck, and you're doing some writing about this. And as Michael said, one of the things that often happens to practitioners is we hear these competing ideas from the science and then we don't know what to make of it. And I don't think that's where you're going here with growth mindset. You have some really interesting comments, but I don't think you're saying throw the baby out with the bathwater. Help us get the nuance of growth mindset that we should be understanding.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

I think I can get right to the core of the nuance there with a quote from Maslow: "What's not worth doing is not worth doing well." And that just explains my whole critique of growth mindset theory. But still, of course, not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What tends to happen is that wonderful researchers - I consider them my friends, like Angela Duckworth and Carol Dweck - they will do a lot of hard-earned research and will present a construct, but then educators will treat it like it's the greatest thing since sliced bread and will apply it indiscriminately to everything without any appreciation of context. I saw it happen not just with growth mindset, but I saw it happen with grit. It's just like, "Oh my God, you have entire schools that are now around grit. Grit is the only thing that matters in the school." And it's like, why is grit the only thing that matters? I don't think Angela would ever say that. Angela is a wonderfully nuanced human, and she would never argue that. It's just ridiculous how much we can focus so much on. And so I think blind grit, as I've called it, or blind growth mindset...You can have growth mindset, mindset up the wazoo for things that aren't right for you, and then why should we be rewarding that? You applied your growth mindset to that? I make the distinction between growth mindset and growth motivation. In my self-actualization program, we really focus on growth motivation. We really don't talk about growth mindset at all because I think that can come from a growth motivation when you are intrinsically motivated to grow in a certain direction based on what is really right for you or right for your soul. Again, sorry, pardon me if I sound woo woo here, but I do think there is something. There's a capital self soul, whatever the meditation people far before psychology ever existed, as a field pointed out, when you're really, really in touch with that, you can't help but have a growth mindset. That's like an outcome of a growth motivation. But when you lead with growth mindset without the soul involved, I don't think that's anything to be applauded.

Michael Horn:

Super interesting, Scott, because hearing you say that reminds me also of sort of the research around motivation more generally. It's not just your belief in, "Can I accomplish the goal?" it's the "Is it a goal worth accomplishing?" And to me, and not to some other person, but to me. And so it sounds like it comes from there. The other thing I've taken from some of your conversations, and I want to try this out on you and see if it makes sense, is in one of the conversations you had with Carol, she did and you did talk about how she could have like a low dosage intervention, a 45 minutes or a couple of times sort of tutorial, if you will, on growth mindset. And it could produce – I'm going to mess it up - but I think a 0.15 standard deviation of impact. And she's like, this is a huge thing. But then I think your observation was that it could be undermined by other characteristics, like if the teacher didn't really believe in growth...And I'll try to use growth motivation for this conversation. Or something I think a lot about is that the system often undermines these views of growth. So in a time-based education system or a zero-sum education system, I can tell you all about growth mindset or growth motivation all I want. But at the end of the day, if at the end of a three-week unit, we all move on to the next one, regardless of the effort you've put in, regardless of learning, and I label you a C student, or something, I've just shot in the foot everything I was preaching in my 45-minute intervention. And so in some ways, the environment, I think, deeply undermines any of these things, intentionally or unintentionally. But maybe I'm misunderstanding you. I sort of wanted to paint that scenario and get you to react.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Context matters. And in the more recent updated papers that Carol has written, to be fair to Carol, she makes that very clear. I have a Substack newsletter and I did a really deep, deep reference list with a deep dive. Yeah, it's really nerdy. I wanted to lay it all out there to show I don't have an agenda. I think that's something that's a little bit quirky about me. Is that with any of this, I don't have an agenda. I have beliefs based on evidence. But I can always be changed and my beliefs can change. Although I did, earlier, say "I firmly believe." I do firmly believe things, but even those can be changed. But when you look at the full research literature in the past five years on growth mindset, everyone agrees: context matters. Everyone agrees. When we're not talking about you're trying to sell a best-selling book and the publicity machine isn't behind it...The publicity machine doesn't care at all about the truth. It cares about what it cares...It has its own goals. The publicity ecosystem has its own goals. But if your goal is truth, everyone agrees. If you read Carol's response to the critics...I posted a paper that her David Yeager, I think that's his name, David Yeager, who's also a star superstar in this world. Really heartfelt. He has a really heartfelt love of this work. He does. And he really wants to help others. And I've talked to him. And so I can say that to be the case, he's a big influencer.

Diane Tavenner:
Of my work as well.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Amazing. Yeah. I have nothing but massive respect for all these people, but I am a nerd. At the end of the day, I really want to know the truth. I don't like BS. I don't like a lot of fat around things. I want to be like, no what is the data? And everyone agrees, when they wrote their response paper to the critics, they agreed. In the response paper, they said underserved populations tend to benefit more from growth mindset interventions than upper-class rich people. And you look at the little nuances, teacher effectiveness matters. Like, you can have a terrible teacher teaching growth mindset, and that's not as effective an intervention than a good teacher. So you start adding in these really important nuances and it adds up to a much more nuanced picture.

Michael Horn:

Let's go to the other topic that you've spent a lot of time on researching: intelligence. You've done a lot of work on the construct of intelligence and general IQ and such. And at least in my experience, educators are often uncomfortable with the notion that a general IQ or something like that might exist. And of course, there's lots of other works around intelligence. There's Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. There's stuff on emotional intelligence, Peter Salovey, others. And some people will then throw arrows at those folks. I think for our audience, it would be useful for you to give a bit of a landscape around the research around intelligence and what are the implications for educators here.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

I mean, how much time do you have?

Michael Horn:

We'll let you stretch out a little bit.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Yeah, I'm a little bit on the Asperger spectrum, so if you get me started on a passion topic, I can't stop talking. So this is particularly...While everyone else was dating in grad school, I was in the library, literally going through every book in the intelligence book section. So I'm obsessed with that question you asked. Well, Robert Sternberg, for instance, he was my advisor in grad school.

Michael Horn :

Oh, wow.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

And I was accepted to work with Howard Gardner as well at Harvard. So I had to make that choice. Do I work with Robert Sternberg or Howard Gardner? No offense to Howard Gardner, I chose to be in a psychology department as opposed to a school of education. But they both influenced me greatly when I was an undergraduate and I was reading their works because I really felt like it rang true that there is something, there is more to intelligence than what's measured on IQ tests. And that to me was a very important insight. They both differ in what that "more" is, but they both argue that IQ tests are missing out on a lot of what it is to be intelligent. I would argue that it misses out a lot of what it means to be human. And that's a little bit of a different argument. That's sort of the direction I've gone in that's different than both of them just giving you a sort of context. And where do I sit in this whole thing? Yeah. So they really focus on extending the abilities, right? Both of them. It's abilities they're extending, but I'm trying to extend beyond ability to passion and to the domain of motivation. So that was my...I hope people view that as a contribution to the field of intelligence and the field of gifted education. I reported on a statistic over a decade ago that boggled my mind. [Out of] almost every gifted education program in the country, only one considers motivation an important part of the identification process for giftedness. And so that blew my mind because talent and motivation, to me, are inextricably intertwined. Ability and motivated, whatever you want to call it, talent, ability, intelligence, whatever the heck you want to call it, they are so inextricably intertwined. A lot of pop books like to say talent is overrated. You could sell a lot of copies of books [with that]. If you say talent is overrated, I think talent is underrated. And what I mean by that...Maybe I'll write the book someday: *Talent Is Underrated*. I actually am thinking about that. It sounds cheeky. And someone might say, "Well, how, Scott? Wait. How could you say that? Aren't you making the argument? What?" My argument is that, no, talent is really important, but in a different way than people think. I don't believe that it should be threatening to others if someone has an innate talent. I think that we should have a school system where everyone's unique talents and its linkages to their own motivations and goals are appreciated. And we're not anywhere near that. We're cutting SAT programs. We're terrified of talent in the name of. "Don't open up this can in the name of equity." We've said excellence just doesn't matter at all. I believe you can have equity and excellence. Don't get me wrong. I'm not a monster, but I'm just saying it's like everyone's one way or the other in their thinking these days, and we need more of a "both and" way of thinking. I think that excellence has fallen by the wayside in this. We're terrified to admit that intelligence matters or that there are talents. I would rather broaden the notion of talent to include motivation but not get rid of or ignore

talent as a concept that's important or intelligence as a concept that's important. There are obvious individual differences in various dimensions, and you can sweep them under the rug as much as you want to in the name of equity and say, like, "Oh, everyone is exactly the same. We're communism." But no matter how hard you try to do that, good luck. People's soul is still going to yearn for expression no matter what you do.

Diane Tavenner:

Something that's coming up for me right now is, I know we're getting to a place where we probably need to close, but, Scott, you've touched on it a bunch.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

It got me started.

Diane Tavenner:

It feels like it's okay to share. One of the things that I think the two of us have connected on over the years is a sort of common experience as children in education. For me personally, I may have touched on this before, but I was tested for special education, and I was denied access to gifted programs, and that then put me in that middle mainstream that you're talking about. Tons of context was missing. I was in a home that was physically and emotionally abusive, and there was all this stuff going on. And to your point, inside of me as a little girl, I knew that I was highly motivated. There's things of me that needed to be expressed and come out and always felt like they were sort of hampered or blocked by the system. And I got lucky along the way that a few people believed in me in ways. And I know you have a very similar story that we have really resonated...that influences how we see education in the system and the purpose of it. And so I just feel like that's coming out. We're just scratching the surface of how it comes out in your work and your willingness to be nuanced and to not sort of just accept these big concepts and have a polarized conversation, but actually dig in on what the implications and what they mean at deeper levels.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Absolutely. I just tweeted something just a couple of minutes ago - not...minutes before our interview, that'd be awkward – [that] said, while extremists certainly think they are the most knowledgeable in the room, there's a new massive worldwide study across 44 different nations that found that moderates are actually the most knowledgeable about politics. But I think that this applies to anything - educators as well. I think that the loudest voice in the room isn't necessarily the most knowledgeable.

Diane Tavenner :

So many things for us to take away. But I think the one that I really want to focus in on as we wrap is your willingness to have your mind changed. So to hold strong perceptions and opinions about what you're doing today, but then being open to what the evidence is going to say and what more you can learn.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

I'll give you an example of that real quick. I went into the field thinking I was taking down IQ. Gardner, Stern[berg], that was my starting place. And carving my own unique space has been a journey because I started to do traditional IQ research with Nicholas McIntosh at University of Cambridge, published articles on IQ with IQ test constructors, like, sort of went to the dark side, of what I had originally viewed as the dark side, and realized that there is a lot of nuance to this stuff. The field of human intelligence is actually a really rich, interesting, exciting field. The genetics, the neuroscience, the interactions between genetics and the environment and even lead and how much that can affect environmental factors, epigenetic expressions. It's such a rich, rich field. And then to just make some blanket statements like "IQ bad," I don't know. What will they say is good? IQ bad - what's good? I don't know. What's the opposite of IQ? "Being dumb, good." Let's promote dumbness in society now. I think that there just is a lot of...But that's one example, anyway, of how my mind changed over the years, because I did start off thinking in a simplistic way and my own approach. Now, I literally said, talent is underrated. I said that. Scott Barry Kaufman said that. I would never have said that when I started off in my career. There was a book, I think it was called *Talent Is Overrated*. Yeah, that's actually the title of the book, and that was one of my bibles, along with Howard Gardner's book and Sternberg's book. And so that would have been my sort of proselytizing to everyone is that talent's overrated. "We need to ignore talent." And my nuance is that I'm saying, "No, actually, I think we can hold in our mind multiple things at once that talent really exists." I watched this five-year-old prodigy playing Rockmanoff on YouTube the other day. Well, you want to say, "Let's cancel any program to help nurture that kid, because we're all...With enough grit, with enough growth mindset..."

Michael Horn:

We can all do that.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

We can all do that? Like, no, no, we can't. Sorry.

Michael Horn:

Wow.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Do you know what I'm saying?

Diane Tavenner:

I totally know what you're saying. And the only thing I would add on to it, and then I'll turn it over to Michael to bring us home, is, I believe there's something in every single human. There is talent in every single human, and that's what we should be searching for and enabling to come out, because we just have such a limited view on what is valued and what talent is. And so the companion to that is the expansion of appreciation and definition of talent.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Well, that's it. You nailed it. I think we're all on the same page.

Michael Horn:

I think that's right. And I love taking that from this conversation. It's more helping the individual express what's meaningful to them and how they can make a contribution to the broader society. So, Scott, as we wrap up, Diane and I have little tradition where we give folks a little bit of a window into things we're watching for pleasure or reading for pleasure, whatever. It might be, often not related to work. Sometimes it is related to work, because Diane and I are nerds, and I love that about you. It's hard for us to strip that away. So, yeah, if we could put you on the spot, what's something you're writing or, excuse me, listening to? Watching? Reading?

Scott Barry Kaufman:

Sure. So I'm absolutely obsessed right now with the field of mentalism, which is a subset of magic. And I practice now about 8 hours a day. And I created an Instagram. I'm the amazing Dr. Scott.

Michael Horn:

Okay, we'll follow.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

A year or two from now, look out. I want to actually maybe move into doing some gigs and things. I'm going to set up a table on the beach path here in Santa Monica. I can read your mind. I think it's a nice fusion of my psychology background. Anyway, that's what I'm into. Yeah.

Michael Horn:

Diane, what about you?

Diane Tavenner:

Well, I'm going to change up today, because this conversation has brought back to me a short story that I've read many times that is just so related to what we're talking about. It's a Kurt Vonnegut short story called Harrison Bergeron. And if you haven't read it, it just epitomizes what we're talking about in this conversation. So highly recommend. Very provocative and interesting. How about you, Michael?

Michael Horn:

Very cool. Well, I confess I've been in such a state of mind with my family. Scott, my father-in-law passed away, so he was mildly on the Asperger's spectrum as well, and had all these handwriting patents and recognition. He would read people's personalities through their handwriting. Really fun stuff.

Scott Barry Kaufman:

I love this guy.

Michael Horn:

Amazing individual helped build the initial Thinkpad by IBM. But as a result, though, I've been unable to read or watch much the last few weeks. And so I've been going deep on just Australian Open tennis because that's my happy place. And as a result, the Two-Minute Tennis channel on YouTube because I've been reconstructing my backhand. And even though I haven't been able to play as much as I wanted to, little two-minute tips here just to sort of allow me to get better at that. So it's not magic or mentalism, but this has been my little escape. So for folks who are also avid tennis players, subscribe to the Two-Minute Tennis channel, but also subscribe to Scott's podcast, the psychology podcast. And Scott, thanks for joining us. And all of you listening, thanks for joining us, as always, on Class Disrupted.