

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Theo Dawson:** Everybody can come out of schooling with a good mind and with trust and with human skills and all of those kinds of things that we need to be able to live well in the world. This is about I've built the skills that I need to be able to solve these problems, and I know it. Whereas I think what we're doing to our kids right now is we're depriving them of the opportunity to feel that they have competence in almost everything.

[00:00:23] If we can find a way to make sure that everybody has the opportunity to grow optimally into the best human that they can possibly be, that's where our main chance lies.

[00:00:39] **Nate Hagens:** Today I'm pleased to be joined by learning and development researcher Dr. Theo Dawson, alongside a returning guest and friend of mine, Dr. Zak Stein. Together, we explore how the core skills needed to navigate today's crises are being stifled by our modern education and testing systems, and what alternatives might help young people engage in a better way of learning.

[00:01:03] Dr. Theo Dawson is the founder and executive director of Lectica, a nonprofit organization that develops and administers evidence-based developmental assessments and builds knowledge about learning and its role in the future of society. She received her master's and PhD from the University of California at Berkeley and is published widely in the field of cognitive development psychology.

[00:01:26] Dr. Zak Stein is a philosopher of education as well as a co-founder of Lectica. He is also the co-founder of the Center for World Philosophy and

# The Great Simplification

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Religion, the Civilization Research Institute, and the Consilience Project. He's the author of dozens of published papers and two books, including *Education in a Time Between Worlds*.

[00:01:45] Zak received his Doctor of Education from Harvard University. In this episode, Zak and Theo break down where our modern education systems have gone wrong over the last century and how this has contributed to today's global crises. They especially focus on the use of standardized testing to over prioritize narrow boundary skill sets and memorization, which ultimately dampens the brain's ability to learn and think critically. Instead, Theo and Zak propose an alternative method of developmental measurement, one which emphasizes mental complexity, coherence, and collaboration, ultimately hoping that cultivating these traits will make us more capable of solving our present challenges, as well as handling whatever we may face in the future.

[00:02:34] With that, please welcome Dr. Theo Dawson and Dr. Zak Stein. Welcome, Theo and Zak.

[00:02:42] **Theo Dawson:** Nice to be here.

[00:02:43] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. You have both spent decades researching how to best help children learn and develop, especially studying the role of measurement in education, including three decades of, your work, Theo, culminating in the recent completion of a new framework on how to measure mental development, and we're gonna dig into the details of all that later in this episode.

[00:03:07] But given world events, just to start, with the Middle East war, today is Wednesday, March twenty-fifth when we're recording this. That's kind of on everyone's minds, and no matter how it resolves, I think our world has changed. So on top of everything else going on in the world, I wanna ask each of you to

# The Great Simplification

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start by articulating why is it so important that we now have different and new ways of educating young humans in the world now unfolding ahead of us?

[00:03:44] **Theo Dawson:** Good question. The idea to pursue the path that I pursued began at a time of crisis as well. And I've belong-- I think for most of my adult life, I've held the conviction that if humanity itself wants to develop, that our primary focus needs to be on the development of our children. And if we don't offer our children environments in which their minds can develop in a healthy way, in which they can thrive as, human animals, in which they can learn how to be with other humans and work with other humans well, that we just don't stand a chance, and particularly in times of crisis.

[00:04:32] I think that these kinds of crises arise out of our human fears and out of our doubts and out of our pain, and if we can find a way to make sure that everybody has the opportunity to grow optimally into the best human that they can possibly be, that's where our main chance lies.

[00:04:52] **Zak Stein:** You know, the first part of my career was working with Theo with the same mentality that education is primary, and it was actually working in these problems that I discovered the problem of civilizational collapse.

[00:05:04] I mean, Theo, you and I talked about it because you could see how if you broke the educational system There would be such a profound confusion and such a profound kind of like, you know, like spreading like wildfire type of contagion. And so wars often break out from confusion, from misunderstanding, from all kinds of things that could have been avoided had the precursor, had the upstream educational experiences of the key individuals involved and the key populations involved just been completely different.

[00:05:39] And so in a sense, the war is shocking, but not surprising because of the state of education in America for the past 20, 30 years. And this isn't even

# The Great Simplification

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taking a stance on the war. It's saying People are not equipped to understand what's occurring in the world. The world, the global-- So, you know, the measurement system we're talking about is a measurement of hierarchical complexity.

[00:06:02] So that's about how much complexity can you really manage? Like you're exposed to an overwhelming amount, how much can you really metabolize? And, and we're ill-equipped to deal with just the sheer complexity, just the sheer number of ongoing... Just understanding the Ukraine situation alone, let alone the Middle East plus Africa, you know, Africa plus China exists.

[00:06:26] And so it's just the-- So the immensity of it requires a fundamentally different approach to education that, that allows us to develop into our full reflective capacity, to be able to act meaningfully rather than just out of confusion and trauma.

[00:06:41] **Theo Dawson:** And anger and frustration. Mm-hmm. And I think one of the things that we saw back in the day, and we're talking the turn of the last century now, was that the educational programs that were coming in and the form of assessments that were coming in were going to be absolutely destructive of the human mind because they were not taking into account human differences.

[00:07:09] they were built around the supposition that fairness in education was to put-- m- have all five-year-olds learn the same stuff as all other five-year-olds. We talked about that so much back in the day. Like how could you think that putting a system in place that is a, level playing field if you're expecting all children to be the same?

[00:07:29] It's outrageous.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:07:30] **Nate Hagens:** I know a lot of your work, Theo, on your new framework is about measurement. and let me segue with this. Yesterday I did a podcast with Ian McGilchrist, and one of the things he pointed out is once all the beautiful things in the human experience like love and sex and money and friendship and all the things, once they're labeled and measured, they lose their beauty of their original sense.

[00:08:04] But can you explain, why measurement is so important and why measurement has been misused in our educational system, so far?

[00:08:15] **Theo Dawson:** First of all, I'd argue that we haven't been doing measurement yet. What we've been doing is something called testing.

[00:08:23] And it's not the same thing because if you're, when you're doing measurement is independent of any particular kind of aim or objective.

[00:08:34] It's contentless It's something that, that affords more possibilities rather than fewer possibilities, and it's something that can be used to create fairness in the world.

[00:08:47] **Nate Hagens:** Just so I understand, there's a difference between testing and measurement, and we've been doing testing but not measurement.

[00:08:55] **Theo Dawson:** But not measurement, yes.

[00:08:57] **Zak Stein:** It's important to get that in most sciences, measurement is a very specific thing where they're succeeding with doing measurement. In psychology, things are very vexed, and the problem has been that many psychologists believe they're doing measurement when really they're just doing testing as Theo is suggesting.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:09:14] So, you know, for example, a ruler, has univariant kind of-- you know, it's divided into things that are exactly the same size. And if I pick up the ruler and I move it to a piece of wood or I move it to my foot or I move it to a slinky or I move it to a cat, the ruler stays exactly the same. And I know that because I can see it, and it's a simple physical measurement system.

[00:09:42] that type of thing doesn't really exist in most of what is done in educational psychology and testing. What you have is a different type of process. So for example, the IQ test is an example of that. It is more like a statistical artifact than like a thing that detects a truly invariant property of nature.

[00:10:01] So there's been this question, what does it mean to do measurement in psychology? It's this question of psychometrics. And some people have decided, well, it's arbitrary. It's really only just the statistical artifact thing. So they're not realists. They don't think the mind works like other parts of nature work, where there are invariant properties that can just be measured like temperature, right?

[00:10:24] Other psychologists who are realists, which would be the neo-Piagetians, I would argue, say, "No, there's a way that the mind is." You can measure the mind, but not all parts of it, but there are parts of it you can isolate, and this construct of hierarchical complexity is one of those, which, no, you can measure it.

[00:10:40] You can create a thing that's univariant that you can take and you can move it around and apply it in different contexts, and you can prove that it stays the same. and so then that's the psychometric part Theo can talk more about. But theoretically, you imagine an apple, right? you're running an apple orchard, and you're like, "Okay, let's test the apple."

[00:10:58] You bite the apple and you chew it and you're like, "Oh, this apple's sweeter than that apple." That's a test. It's not crazy to do that with your apples.

# The Great Simplification

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But if you're a scientist, you would do something completely different. You could literally do dozens of tests, that would be actual measurements of the qualities of the apple, right?

[00:11:17] and so that difference between a kind of an assessment which is Getting at something and a scientific measurement instrument which can demonstrate its own properties of being measurement-like is, too lacking in psychology. There's very few places where this is done, and where it is done, it is often done in a way that, isn't useful educationally, that's actually damaging educationally.

[00:11:42] It's implemented in ways, where students and teachers don't benefit, but decision-makers, do.

[00:11:51] **Nate Hagens:** I wanna get to your, current work, or your lifelong work, on this question, Theo, but maybe we look historically first, especially in the 20th century. Mm-hmm. Can you share, what did testing and measurement look like, and what role did it play in our broader education system and future employment for the then children, eventual adults?

[00:12:15] And maybe you could distinguish if this is a US phenomenon or a global phenomenon.

[00:12:20] **Theo Dawson:** well, I'm gonna speak from ex- my personal experience because I grew up in the 20th century and was part of the educational system. And at that time, we were doing something called progressive education, in which students went through this process, called streaming, where if you were a bright child academically oriented, you would get into one group.

[00:12:45] And if you are a child who was more interested in building houses and cars, you would be in another group. And so I benefited hugely from that arrangement because I got to be around other kids that were like me, who had

# The Great Simplification

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similar interests, who, you know, were, all able to be, you know, participants in the material and classroom and understanding what we were learning and, it was fun to be in those kinds of classrooms.

[00:13:12] And we did get tested. every year or every two years, we would take these tests that were offered by the-- You know, everybody in the country took them, and you would go into the, to the office of the g- of the counselor, and the counselor would say, "Oh, look, you did really well on this assessment. That's cool.

[00:13:31] You could do whatever you wanna do when you grow up."

[00:13:33] **Nate Hagens:** Or- I, remember.

[00:13:35] **Theo Dawson:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it was just, it was so-- it was just information. It was just information. And in the classroom, we had grades, and teach-- lots of teachers' comments on our work, and we wrote a lot. And I think kids don't have much of an opportunity to write now because there's so much focus on learning specific material that there's just not enough time to just be interacting and writing and doing projects.

[00:14:03] So that was blasted at the turn of the century by this new No Child Left Behind idea because when you tested the kids that came out of that system, we weren't happy with the test scores But the test scores were on tests that weren't testing the things that we were actually learning or the things that mattered.

[00:14:24] Because what, what does matter in an education? You come out of it competent, right? You come out of it with skills. You come out of it prepared for adulthood. You come out of it with the ability to work well with others. Those are all valid things that nobody was measuring, and nobody has really been able to measure effectively ever.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:14:45] And so we didn't get good scores on multiple choice tests, so what? But that was used to change the whole educational system. That and a few other things that happened at the turn of the century, such as, the move toward accountability testing in schools so that, you know, schools were put to the test.

[00:15:05] If, your kids can do well enough in these tests, you get to stay a school. We're gonna take away your funding if the kids don't do well enough on these tests. it turned into-- There, there was also an initiative for everybody to go to college because you're not gonna be a success in life if you don't go to college.

[00:15:21] Yeah. Because somebody saw a statistic that said there was a relationship between going to college and making money.

[00:15:27] **Nate Hagens:** Is this 100,000 educators, somehow convene and vote on how all this happens, or is this politburo of 12 people that made all these decisions that you just said h- I, I-- I mean, when you say we did this, like who was it that made those decisions for all of the United States children?

[00:15:46] **Theo Dawson:** It was a political decision that was made by the federal government when we-- I think it was about that time that we founded the Educational-

[00:15:53] **Zak Stein:** Testing Service. Yeah. If you look at the, if you look at the history of educational testing in particular-

[00:15:58] **Nate Hagens:** Oh my gosh. When, I think of the acronym ETS, my blood pressure goes up a little bit.

[00:16:03] Exactly. I must have something in my amygdala when I was 12 when I see those letters. Yeah.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:16:08] **Zak Stein:** Exactly. Well, and the guy who started that, one of the first president of that, was also one of the key figures in the Manhattan Project and one of the presidents of Harvard. What? Yeah. James, Bryan Conan, I think was his name, or Conan Bryan.

[00:16:22] I forget which one 'cause I'm dyslexic. but so the Educational Testing Service was part of the military industrial establishment that had first repurposed the IQ testing to do the f- World War I, World War II, Army Alpha and Beta, which were the first massive industrial scale standardized tests, which was an adaptation of Binet's IQ test, which basically took a million incoming recruits and sorted them by intelligence, ostensibly.

[00:16:51] Now, very complicated what actually happened there. But the ETS just turned that into something we use to measure all the high school kids to change college applications, and that happened because of Sputnik. So you have to get Sputnik, right? You have to understand that the, push from the standardized testing complex and the change of the curriculum Theo was talking about, which kind of did away from the progressive schools, came from threat of Soviet Union and scientific arms race.

[00:17:20] And so the notion was we could find every schoolboy in Iowa who never would have found their way to Harvard, never would have found their way up into all the research apparatus that supports our state and military had we not created the IQ test and had we not created the SAT, which found this brilliant kid and s- so it goes from an aristocracy to a meritocracy

[00:17:40] **Nate Hagens:** But even if that were true and the testing was completely accurate, you're-- it's a little bit like an idiot savant filter.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:17:48] You're filtering for intelligence, that narrow boundary thing, when all the other things that we might need to develop or to compete with the Soviets or whatever are not measured. Right. Yeah. Oh, 100%.

[00:18:00] **Theo Dawson:** Mental development was not a concern. It was genius that they were looking for, particular kind of genius.

[00:18:07] **Zak Stein:** And it worked, by the way. I mean, like, if you look at the history of the post-war higher education system in America and the way the money coupled to places like UC Berkeley and Harvard and MIT, and the way they found the brightest minds, I mean, you know, we won, quote-unquote, "The Cold War" and dominated the scientific arms races.

[00:18:26] And in part, that was because we were optimizing for a very narrow type of thing and rewarding it very heavily, and that thing got shaped and morphed, qui-quite a bit.

[00:18:38] **Theo Dawson:** And it didn't get down into the K-12 educational system right away. It was more something that was happening at the level of getting into college.

[00:18:45] So the progressive education here continued right up to the beginning of the 20th century.

[00:18:50] **Zak Stein:** And then No Child Left Behind. That's, that was the focus of my dissertation, which was, again, a massive federal intervention over the state's rights to mandate a certain type of standardized testing and tie it to school accountability, which means punishing schools that do bad on tests, rewarding schools that do good on tests, which set up an incentive structure to game the tests.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:19:13] And, you know, the largest cheating scandal probably in history occurred in Atlanta, under the No Child Left Behind mandates, where from the superintendent down, there was systematic cheating across the entire district because of the nature of the incentive structures, that had been put in place.

[00:19:32] It's, very well documented. So that was the atmosphere in which Theo and I were working.

[00:19:37] **Nate Hagens:** So among the other problems with what you just said is the focus switched from educating and preparing young humans for successful adulthood to getting funding and prioritizing the school itself rather than the students.

[00:19:56] **Theo Dawson:** I think that we were doing a bit better at that, but I think that the formal educational system in the United States has always primarily been designed to serve em-employers.

[00:20:07] the children themselves Of course, if you've got great teachers, the children themselves are gonna get some of that kind of nourishment from being in an environment created by a wonderful teacher.

[00:20:18] But when these big decisions are made, it, feels like the children just don't matter at all. I mean, none of, those things that you talk about, Zak, would say the important thing is the health of the children and the wellness of the children and the, s- the, the, growth of the children.

[00:20:37] **Nate Hagens:** So how did those changes, the No Child Left Behind changes, as well as the emphasis on standardized testing in the United States actually affect the children's mental development? Do we have evidence on that?

# The Great Simplification

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[00:20:51] **Theo Dawson:** I have quite a bit of evidence. The first hard evidence that we found was when we were doing a very large, literacy project with Harvard back in the teens, where we were looking at the literacy development of children in public schools all up and down the eastern seaboard.

[00:21:10] So there were thousands and thousands of students involved. And we created an assessment for that program that was just looking at their reflective judgment, their ability to think through complex problems with no correct answers, which is very different from what they were being educated for. And we were scoring those for their hierarchical complexity and scoring them for how clear the arguments were that the students were making because we wanted to look at the health of the mind that was producing the, the responses.

[00:21:43] And what we discovered through that particular project was that children who had a high clarity in their performances were much more likely to continue growing on a steeper trajectory over time than those who had low clarity.

[00:22:02] **Nate Hagens:** How do you define clarity?

[00:22:03] **Theo Dawson:** And so it-- what we used was a set of rubrics that we created that looked at various aspects of the way that they were making their arguments.

[00:22:10] But primarily, what's really underlying this is that their arguments hang together, that the sentences relate to one another, that you can see that there's real meaning being conveyed. And what we found in this population was that the vast majority of the students didn't seem to be able to convey clear meaning.

[00:22:30] and so what we did was we looked at the relationship between the c-- the clarity scores that the students received the first time they took an

# The Great Simplification

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assessment, and all of these students had taken assessments over-- multiple times over a period of a few years. And we looked at the relationship between that first clarity score and how much they grew over time.

[00:22:53] And what we found was that the majority of children in that sample, it was predicted that they would probably stop growing completely in, in grade nine.

[00:23:06] mentally because they'd been so messed up. Their brains had been so messed up by the high levels of memorizing and the lack of ever being able to understand anything that they were learning 'Cause

[00:23:17] **Zak Stein:** that's what you have to get was that these were kids, many of them who would do fairly well on a traditional multiple choice test or a vocabulary test or a test that didn't push them to be reflective and use complex language skills, right?

[00:23:29] So they, they had the vocabulary, many of them, and it was actually the vocabulary that was destabilizing their ability to make coherent arguments, and then the long run outcome of that was overall less growth because you have no stable foundation to kind of build higher order knowledge on.

[00:23:44] **Nate Hagens:** What percentage of the United States educational system is still this, what you just described?

[00:23:50] **Theo Dawson:** Things have gotten a little bit better, but we still have a very strong focus on content, on very particular content chosen by people who want those employees. So there was a real big push for science and science instruction, a real big push for math, and a real big push for literacy, and many other things have kind of dropped out of the curriculum because they weren't tested in the same way that these other things were.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:24:19] **Nate Hagens:** So we got good employees and stunted humans?

[00:24:22] **Theo Dawson:** We got terrible employees because we stunted the humans. Employers are complaining like crazy- Oh, okay ... about the, difficulty people have thinking.

[00:24:30] **Zak Stein:** Yeah. And with the twenty tens, you also had the introduction of social media and ubiquitous cell phones among the youth, right?

[00:24:37] So there was this perfect storm. So Jonathan Haidt's work, right, so he's shown basically if you do global mental health surveys In the past, like through the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s, you almost don't look at the kids 'cause the kids are basically healthy. It's the adults who are mentally unwell.

[00:24:53] Now you look at global mental health statistics, and the kids are more depressed, anxious than the adults. This is a complete flip from all the history of the global testing here, and it starts to flip around 2010. It starts to flip right around the time when we're starting to see kind of, both the ubiquity of the cellphone and the kind of en-end game of the standardized testing, and curriculum complex that have been put in place.

[00:25:20] **Nate Hagens:** And, when you say kids, under 18 or like- Under 18. Under 18. Under 18,

[00:25:25] **Zak Stein:** but you're also seeing in five-year-olds, six-year-olds, eight-year-olds, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety. You're getting suicides in 10-year-olds. Like there are big statistics in suicides of kids around. That's, was unheard of, like completely, totally rare and strange for there to be a suicide at that age.

[00:25:45] Now it is a

# The Great Simplification

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[00:25:46] **Nate Hagens:** thing. So, so you, think it's a combination of social media, maybe now AI, and the actual testing way that we, educate. I mean, they spend 40 hours a week in school when they're kids. Mm-hmm. Yeah, so

[00:26:00] **Zak Stein:** that's, it was that perfect storm, and other, there's other factors too. In fact, the question is how to explain that drop in mental health.

[00:26:06] **Theo Dawson:** And now we have AI coming in, no research behind it, no genuine questions about whether it's gonna be good for us or not, and it's trying to take over, you know, the, it's trying to take over the system, which is really just about making money. It's not about anybody really caring about the children, as far as I can tell.

[00:26:25] **Nate Hagens:** So given your expertise on education and testing and measurement, can you speculate how some people using AI for tutoring and maybe not even going to school or college because they can learn everything on Claude or ChatGPT, what forcings will that, cause, generally?

[00:26:48] **Theo Dawson:** I don't think we know what's going to happen, but what I do know is that human beings evolved as a-- we're basically, we're animals.

[00:26:57] We're human animals. We're evolved animals who have these very special minds. But the way that we, our brains are designed to learn is through practice and experience and engagement with other people in-- the physical and social world. Yeah. And every moment that we spend not doing those things is a moment when we're not getting the benefit of what our build, brains and m-bodies are built to do.

[00:27:26] We're subtracting from the opportunity for that person to become the fully realized human being they can be.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:27:32] **Nate Hagens:** I know Zak knows my work pretty well. Theo, you don't as much, but I'm looking at energy depletion and, the depletion of the stability of our biosphere and the depletion of trust in geopolitics, but I, didn't really think about it that our young healthy humans are also a resource that is in depletion, and it's a major, resource that we need for the future, for better futures for the planet and the biosphere.

[00:28:04] **Theo Dawson:** And we need to see them as individual valuable beings and support their development as individual valuable beings. And some of the things that really bother me about the way people are reacting to the current situation are people who are coming along with just other new ways we'll manipulate them into being what we want them to be.

[00:28:26] So there's this big movement, they're gonna become-- we're gonna teach them how to all be systems thinkers, so they'll be able to solve the big problems of the world, or we're going to convince them all that they have to save the world. That's gonna be their role. And that is just a continuation of the same thing we've been doing all along.

[00:28:43] **Nate Hagens:** We do need a c- some people to do those things, but not all people for sure.

[00:28:48] **Theo Dawson:** But if we focus on the children and we help each one of them to develop to their full potential, we're gonna get all that.

[00:28:56] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. No, I see.

[00:28:57] **Theo Dawson:** And regardless of where they're gonna end up landing in the, you know, in the, hierarchy of scores, everybody can come out of schooling with a good mind and with trust and with human skills and all of those kinds of things that we need to be able to live well in the world.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:29:14] **Nate Hagens:** Is it partially because humans are so diverse and complex and there's, I'm guessing, eighty to a hundred million sub eighteen-year-olds in the United States or something like that it-- the way that we test them now is just because we can't manage the complexity, so we had to come up with something.

[00:29:34] I mean, is there a way to standardize what you're describing that it could apply to all fifty states and the educational systems there?

[00:29:42] **Theo Dawson:** I like the compassion that I heard there. Like, like there is-- people who make tests, they're not evil. They, just... You-- I do feel compassion for them too, 'cause they are also trying to do something that they think is good.

[00:29:54] But I don't think that there's enough attention paid to the child at the end of the, assessment in, most cases with assessment. I think that's the problem. so by being able to create a content independent, non-deterministic, real measure that treats everybody the same, everybody gets a fair, a fairness, re-regardless of what they're interested in or where they're growing, you know, where they're growing well in, we are, creating, a, system that allows us to follow that child and f- rather than us trying to indoctrinate that child.

[00:30:33] **Nate Hagens:** It sounds to me, and I'm certainly no expert on this, that this done right would require more teachers than we currently have relative to the same amount of students, or is that not correct?

[00:30:46] **Theo Dawson:** I don't think so because there are s-several schools around the world right now that are doing these kinds of things for children without needing more teachers.

[00:30:58] I think that the tools-- that one of the reasons I'm creating-- I've created this tool is because I wanna make it so that more teachers can have the

# The Great Simplification

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information about where a kid's at, so that they've got this other little piece that's helping them to understand where the child's at, so that they can build that skill of trying to provide for that child what that child needs in that particular moment in time.

[00:31:20] And we've pushed teachers away from that because now we're just trying-- th--they're just trying desperately to get their kids to pass the tests because that's what's good for the kids these days, or that's how we think about it. but if you're provided with an opportunity to work with a tool that's constantly supporting you and trying to support that child, I think it takes a lot of the load off of the teacher actually in the end.

[00:31:41] And so I think they will be drawn to something if we make the right kind of thing for them to work with, they, will be drawn to something that's going to help them to do that and to see it become more personalized for those children. So we have a scoring system that's this unidimensional system now that is been thoroughly tested and is now completely standardized, and is also-- and it's kind of-- it's got an interesting way that it's prescriptive in the sense that the scores, the sc- the, scores that we give are based upon the way that a well-developing brain is likely to show up.

[00:32:24] **Nate Hagens:** But what, Zak said earlier that, with Sputnik and the competition, and we did develop the IQ to do all those things, that was like in our national interest. What is in our national or global interest now that we need citizens of the world and the whole biophysical, geopolitical future is going to be different?

[00:32:44] **Theo Dawson:** So it's not about having a culture in which everybody grows up, and we're trying to get everybody to be systems thinkers. We're, creating a diverse, a very-- we're gonna take that diversity that we started with, and we're gonna keep a lot of that diversity because diversity is really important

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# The Great Simplification

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in complex systems, and we're gonna optimize the skills that those kids have so that they're gonna be coming into the world with the basic skills they need to participate in society, plus their own thing, their own skills that they have developed and their healthy minds.

[00:33:17] **Nate Hagens:** As an aside I'm a systems thinker, but I certainly wasn't back in the day. I don't think I became a systems thinker until I was in my 40s because I started studying each of these individual topics, and I studied them for enough time that I eventually saw that they were interrelated. So Zak, what do you, wanna add here?

[00:33:37] There's this

[00:33:37] **Zak Stein:** question about the ideal measurement system would be one that would actually empower the student, empower the teacher. And then this leaves us in a very fundamental question about the design of educational technologies, which are, we designing educational technologies to make the teachers more like experts, make them more like people who make really complex considered judgments under conditions of uncertainty like you would if you're a surgeon or a lawyer or something like that?

[00:34:05] Or are we making technologies that de-skill the teachers towards a path of replacing them under a model of educational technology that's supposed to replace the teacher rather than professionalize and make the teacher like an expert with special forms of knowledge? And so Thea's tool, and one, one of the most exciting things is it could give us a science of education where the teachers are citizen scientists, where the students are scientists about their own learning, rather than have these tests be these radical impositions on the whole system right down to the pedagogy, giving kids ulcers, putting them in high stakes competitions against one another, rather than on a growth mindset in relationship

# The Great Simplification

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to themselves and as part of a system where there's all of this knowledge being generated.

[00:34:50] So it, it's really as Thea was saying, she hesitated to use the word paradigm, but it is a paradigm shift in the nature of thinking about how educational science and measurement could be done.

[00:35:01] **Nate Hagens:** If we change the how educational science is done, don't we first have to change what the explicit goal of education is?

[00:35:12] **Theo Dawson:** Not if you've got a good Trojan horse.

[00:35:16] **Nate Hagens:** Please tell me more.

[00:35:17] **Theo Dawson:** This has been such an uphill battle because, of course, along with, No Child Left Behind, most people who share my pedagogy decided they absolutely hated all kinds of testing and measurement, period. So we have been struggling for years continuing to do this work, believing that if we can get measurement right, we're going to be able to win, you know, we're gonna be able to win people back to considering measurement as, as something of value in education.

[00:35:44] **Nate Hagens:** by the way, let me just interject there. I- is there evidence on the type of schools that don't do testing and how those young humans turn out later versus schools that do testing?

[00:35:56] **Theo Dawson:** No, because the schools that don't do testing won't let their kids be tested, and so they're not getting measured, and so we can't compare them.

[00:36:01] **Nate Hagens:** Ah, that makes sense.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:36:03] **Theo Dawson:** And I've had that problem for thirty years. Thirty years of not being able to show off the schools that are doing a g- good job because the parents will not let the schools test their children.

[00:36:14] **Nate Hagens:** Here's a real dumb question, and I don't-- you don't need to divulge anything overly personal or anything, but can each of you dropped in a room of 12-year-olds or 14-year-olds or what have you, and spending time with these young humans, can you tell, like, yeah, this person is demonstrating clarity and has had some really good education or not?

[00:36:39] **Theo Dawson:** We did a lot of interviewing in the past. Yeah. So we learned yeah.

[00:36:43] **Nate Hagens:** So you know.

[00:36:44] **Theo Dawson:** Oh, we know.

[00:36:45] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:36:46] **Theo Dawson:** I'm largely driven by what I've learned through those kinds of engagements and just, you know, teachers who you come in to do research in the school who say, "Okay, our biggest problem, if you could help us with this, it's the most important thing.

[00:36:59] Why are the kids coming into my classroom like they didn't learn anything last year?"

[00:37:06] And we've got the answer now, you know, because they didn't learn anything last year. They memorized some stuff that they forgot.

[00:37:14] **Nate Hagens:** Oh my gosh. And is this, I know you're focused on the US, but is this kind of a global thing or not as much?

# The Great Simplification

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[00:37:22] **Theo Dawson:** It's become more global because the United States kind of exported a lot of this, and the international testing phenomenon has actually caused a lot of countries to adopt our curriculum.

[00:37:33] So I was just talking to someone today who was talking about building her curriculum around our curriculum standards, and I was like, "No. Don't do it." But yeah, it's, I think it's global. I think I'm hearing people from all around the world complaining about some of the same things that we're struggling with here.

[00:37:53] **Nate Hagens:** Well, I know in countries like Korea, like even parents commit suicide if their kids didn't get good enough scores to get into the best college. I mean, it's really standardized testing and intense. Yeah. That's right. S— so how would your new framework or new measurement, w— how would that change the goals of teaching and educational development?

[00:38:16] **Theo Dawson:** Well, there are, a few components. There's three really critical components to the system that we've created. So we've embedded our m— measure into a system. S— the measure is inside the system, and it's doing its measurements periodically. The system itself is not really focused on the measurement piece.

[00:38:35] The system itself is a, kind of journal. It's a kind of reflective journaling space where s— students once a week will reflect on what they've— they're learning and be built, and learn, and be making connections between different things that they've learned, b— responding to prompts that have either been created by the teacher or are part of the system, or that are part of the system.

[00:38:58] And these prompts can be on any subject. It doesn't matter. So you could— One, one week it could be a math question like, "Can you explain multiplication?" "How does it work?" it could be, the next day it could be talk

# The Great Simplification

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about, right, talk about what it's like to be a good person. What was, what makes a good person?

[00:39:16] And other times it might be, these two people have different perspectives on this thing. Can you explain those two-- Can you under- do you understand those perspectives, and can you suggest some way they might be able to resolve them? Or it could be s- about a historical thing or something in, that they're reading in literature.

[00:39:34] On any subject matter, the point of these questions is that they get the kids to think, make connections, deal with controversy, and do that on a regular basis, so at least once a week, not for a long period of time, fifteen, twenty minutes. and this becomes part of what all students do everywhere. And then the most important piece of this is the third part, which is the c- the collaborative part, where groups of students are put into cohorts, and they reflect upon each other's reflections with one another.

[00:40:09] **Nate Hagens:** Kind of like warm data maybe.

[00:40:11] **Theo Dawson:** Oh, it's very warm. And the teachers also can come in and make their comments, but the students in the classroom working in these cohorts together, the cohorts can be dis- you know, put together and taken apart and redesigned in different groups.

[00:40:27] **Zak Stein:** and get that, that- Doesn't feel like you're being tested.

[00:40:30] **Theo Dawson:** And no sense that you're being- Right ... the, testing piece is really just that you get to see a graph that shows that you're growing with no score on it. It just shows that you're growing, and every other kids looks like they're growing, and y- so you can't com- you're not competing with one another in any way around this assessment.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:40:47] Yeah. But the teacher gets to see all of this going on with the students, and also gets a dashboard that shows where each student actually is, and can use that information to help figure out how to help each particular student, help design really cool cohorts. They're gonna be really supportive for c- certain students.

[00:41:12] we have a-- today, the thing that I finally discovered today, you're gonna, you're gonna love this, Zak, is that we have almost a .5 correlation between our old clarity scores that we did in the research previously and that we've been d- continuing to do, and our fit statistics for- Oh ... the, scoring system.

[00:41:35] So now we can say with confidence that we're going-- the teachers are gonna be able to s- diagnose that a child is struggling, and they're not learning well right now, and help that student to get back on track. And the getting back on track involves not speeding them up, but slowing down.

[00:41:55] **Nate Hagens:** I've heard that, like, three times in the past week in different circumstances.

[00:42:01] Can you explain what you mean by that? By not speeding up, but slowing down? People have given me that advice, like, right now in my life So I'm just wondering what you mean by that.

[00:42:11] **Theo Dawson:** What I mean by that is that what we-- our usual response to kids that are struggling is to try to get them a tutor so they learn it faster.

[00:42:20] Oh, got it. So they're gonna catch up with the other students- Yeah ... right? That's-- this-- we've got this idea of everybody catching up because we've got this weird idea everybody's the same, and if those kids just work hard enough,

# The Great Simplification

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they could all catch up with one another, which is just total nonsense. So what you do with a student who's struggling, they're showing it, b-b-- the way you see it is that they're starting to memorize, and you can see it in the, in, in the fit statistics.

[00:42:43] **Nate Hagens:** And once you start to memorize, you're no longer really learning. You're just trying to- You're not ... try your hardest to get a good score on the test.

[00:42:50] **Theo Dawson:** Survive, yeah.

[00:42:52] **Nate Hagens:** To survive, yeah.

[00:42:54] **Theo Dawson:** And so what you need to do with a child who's showing that pattern is back up and, go and figure out where they stopped learning, and help them to build their mind from that place.

[00:43:05] **Nate Hagens:** So in our, prep for this, in our previous conversation, I understand that there's something in these protocols that you're developing specifically rel- related to embodied understanding. Can you explain what that is and how it relates to the goals?

[00:43:22] **Theo Dawson:** I mean, essentially it's learning through practice.

[00:43:25] So when you are learning through action in the physical or social world, what you're learning is not just an intellectual thing. It's not just the stuff, but it's all of the connections to all of you that is caused by engaging with the material that you're engaging with. So I don't know if you've, have you heard about the connectome?

[00:43:50] **Nate Hagens:** No.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:43:50] **Theo Dawson:** This is my most, the most wonderful area of research in the brain sciences, where they're literally mapping all the neurons in the brain and looking at how they're connected to one another. And what they're learning is that the more connections there are across different parts of the brain, the more capable people are in a wide range of areas.

[00:44:12] So what we're trying to do as a kind of education, and, I've been trying to do this before I ever heard of that connectome because it, it came out of the Piagetian research as a concept, originally. But what we're trying to do is we're trying to ensure that kids are learning in rich engagements so that they're not just connecting a science concept with another science concept that's closely related, but they're connecting the science concept to a physical experience, a social experience, an emotional experience.

[00:44:43] and this is a kind of constant ongoing process of networking the mind and of course, the body's involved when you're actually engaged in engagement as well, that produces those kinds of connectomes that they're showing are more, and more effective. So what this means is that let's just say that somebody is, apex of their development turns out to be somewhere in level 10, which is the most common place for adults to perform in our society.

[00:45:11] they're great level 10s. They're, you know, they can become extremely good at what they do. They can build great expertise and virtuosity in whatever career path that they're on, as long as they're not dealing with having to deal with multiple systems all at the same time or something like that.

[00:45:30] So you've got-- And, you know, they're perfectly capable of doing intelligent voting. It's difficult to manipulate them because they've got a good brain. They're more likely to make good decisions. And they've got this other magic sauce that you get from, through all of that practice, and that is what we call an earned sense of competence.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:45:52] Because when you learn through practice, one of the main things that you learn is if I try hard enough, I'm gonna get there. I want this thing, and if I try hard enough, I'm gonna get there. It's not like this whole self-esteem thing, right, where you just sing songs and then you become, have better self-esteem.

[00:46:08] This is about I've built the skills that I need to be able to solve these problems, and I know it. And so you give them a problem and, they're excited about taking on a new challenge. Whereas I think what we're doing to our kids right now is we're depriving them of the opportunity to feel that they have competence in almost everything.

[00:46:33] Yeah. And we haven't, and they haven't built the skills for b- for building competence and charting their own path towards something.

[00:46:41] **Nate Hagens:** My understanding is at your organization, Lectica, you have-- well, you've dedicated your career towards creating what you believe is the ideal measurement system that could make all this happen and change, which you call the computerized Lectical Assessment System.

[00:47:00] Mm-hmm. So can you explain what facets of human development this system measures and, how, do we measure?

[00:47:07] **Theo Dawson:** The thing that it measures is called hierarchical complexity. You can think of it as measuring the a- the development of meaning in a general sense toward more and more complex understandings and meanings over time.

[00:47:30] That's one way to think about it. You can also just think about it as a purely mathematical thing. Like the way that it, the way that the system works is purely mathematical. It's, matching growth trajectories to people's performances,

# The Great Simplification

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so that's another way to think about it. but I think just thinking of it as increasing complexity is the simplest and easiest way to think about it.

[00:47:51] **Nate Hagens:** And I assume there's a six-year-old version of that and a fourteen-year-old version of that?

[00:47:56] **Theo Dawson:** There's a f- we have, measurements from first speech.

[00:48:01] **Nate Hagens:** Okay.

[00:48:01] **Theo Dawson:** So we can study the development of babies' speech.

[00:48:06] **Nate Hagens:** And presumably at each of the different age groups, the higher that this complexity is, the better, ultimate correlation with being a fully fledged capable adult human?

[00:48:21] **Theo Dawson:** No. So there's multiple different levels at which you can be a quite capable and useful human. and we need a whole lot of variety in that respect because there's roles for everybody- Yep ... but not if we're not, you know, including variety. Wherever you land, you know, wherever you end up falling in that, in the l- in the complexity arena, you have a good mind, a skilled mind.

[00:48:47] You've got an earned sense of competence. You've got a strong sense of yourself as a learner. You've got basic fun- you've got fundamental skills that you need to engage with others. a- so you've got all of these attributes that you're bringing to whatever it is that, that you do. And those people who, are the fast growers and have got the minds that can go further are building all the skills they're gonna need to learn for the rest of their lives.

[00:49:13] And they're gonna go out into the world and they're gonna learn regardless of the context that they're in, because they're gonna make the context for themselves 'cause they know how to learn. They've got all of that experience

# The Great Simplification

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learning, so they've built learning skills that will take them as far as they want to go.

[00:49:27] **Nate Hagens:** So Theo, if there are educators listening to this and they would like to try this out on their students, whether they're in grade school or high school or whatever, is there a way that this can actually be used now in tandem with traditional methods?

[00:49:44] **Theo Dawson:** Absolutely, and we're really, eager to, to pair up with schools that have pedagogies that are aligned with ours in particular, because we want to finally give them an opportunity to be able to show off the success of those programs.

[00:50:00] It's-- It will help all children everywhere if we're able to really show off what those programs are doing for children. And all they need to do is just contact us. There's a, Contact Us link on our website, and, you know, we respond quickly, and I'd love to chat with anybody who has ideas about working with these-- with our tools.

[00:50:19] **Zak Stein:** Cognitive complexity is an important vector here, but as Theo's saying, it's not the main event here. The main event is something more like coherence and capacity for future learning rather than it is just sheer mental complexity. So we need people to be able to handle complex problems, but, you know, as I like to say, the more complex thinker you are, the more complex and significant mistake you can make.

[00:50:44] **Theo Dawson:** So it's v-very important to have a really good mind if you're a complex thinker. Ex-exactly. So it's, not

[00:50:48] **Zak Stein:** the, it's not the case, as in a lot of developmental theory, that the thing is just keep growing up the c- the ladder and, like, things get better

# The Great Simplification

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and better. That's actually not the case. It's better to be a coherent thinker at a lower level than an incoherent thinker at a higher level from the perspective of, like, generating karma.

[00:51:04] If you wanna think about it that way. You can make a lot of complicated

[00:51:07] **Nate Hagens:** mistakes. What is your hope, with this tool, Theo, to run side by side our current, educational testing system, to replace it, to be a voluntary add-on for certain teachers? what do you hope to do with this?

[00:51:25] **Theo Dawson:** All of the above.

[00:51:27] I think, you know, we're investigating various, ways of getting into the system right now and trying to figure out how we're gonna fund some of those initial entrees and, So that, that's, that work is ongoing. But ultimately, I want every single child in the world to have this tool that we've been making, which we call MindLog.

[00:51:47] MindLog. I want every child to have that in their lives, and I'm-- and it is designed in such a way that it will change The teachers will change, and they'll just change organically through the use and the seeing their students in these new ways. And they'll also hopefully be given the opportunity to have more freedom so that they can develop the skills that they need to be the really grand teachers and not just people who are trying to, you know, to teach a specific curriculum.

[00:52:19] **Nate Hagens:** So with or without this tool, how might, teachers, our society, people listening to this, conversation shift the way that we're teaching now to foster more mental complexity in, young adults and children?

# The Great Simplification

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[00:52:36] **Theo Dawson:** Well, fostering more mental health in adults, more coherent minds, healthier, healthier minds. I think now that we have a metric that can measure mental growth and me- and health, then we can say, "These schools are doing it."

[00:52:53] These schools are not doing it."

[00:52:56] **Nate Hagens:** How, do you measure mental growth, and how is mental growth different than mental health?

[00:53:01] **Theo Dawson:** So we're calling the mental growth part the complexity part.

[00:53:04] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. Got it.

[00:53:05] **Theo Dawson:** And mental health is, is-- right now, mental health in our system is the clarity part. It's the, mind is d-developing- Oh

[00:53:13] well enough for them to be clear thinkers.

[00:53:15] **Nate Hagens:** So one part is complexity, and the other is clarity.

[00:53:19] **Theo Dawson:** And then there's the third part, which is about-- which is not about our measurement. It's not about the measurement at all. It's about providing kids with the opportunity to build skills for working well with others through the collaborative piece.

[00:53:33] **Nate Hagens:** What evidence, or experience, h- can you demonstrate or, share? What are the benefits of individual young humans who develop a high level of mental complexity, both in the way they experience the world and eventually what they're able to contribute to society?

# The Great Simplification

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[00:53:52] **Theo Dawson:** I think that fr- at every level of complexity, there are different kinds of things that people are going to be able to contribute.

[00:53:59] So the watchmaker, the, you know, the person who-- the builder, the designer, the-- like, there are so many roles in society for people to hold. The superintendent, you know, the person who greets you and parks your car. Like, all of the roles that we play will be able to, will be able to fulfill those rol- roles, in a better way.

[00:54:24] **Nate Hagens:** Do we need to have a, new economic system or a new cultural aspiration in order for us to make massive changes in how we educate and teach our young humans?

[00:54:38] **Theo Dawson:** If we do, it's going to be a real problem. we're really working hard to make it possible for these, changes to take place without an overhaul of the system.

[00:54:50] 'Cause if you wait to overhaul the system, it's never gonna happen. The system's gonna change because of the education, the education- Ah ... will change.

[00:54:59] **Nate Hagens:** And how might that happen? How might, educating young people that an increasing percentage of them have clarity and complexity and collaboration with others 10, 20, 30 years down the road, how might that itself change the economic system?

[00:55:18] **Theo Dawson:** Well, they're gonna care more about each other. That's a good thing. That's gonna guide decisions that they make in their own lives. they're gonna vote. They're gonna be voters. They're gonna be citizens who are voting, and they're going to be less vulnerable to manipulation. That's gonna change things.

# The Great Simplification

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[00:55:44] Definitely gonna change things. There's a lot of situation we're in right now that has to do with No Child Left Behind.

[00:55:51] **Nate Hagens:** So on the No Child Left Behind note, many educators, are calling out that they feel more and more of their students have now developed some sort of a learned sense of helplessness, where they get stuck in these cycles of feeling like they don't have the ability to overcome the challenges.

[00:56:10] So how could this system that Lectica is working on counteract that phenomenon?

[00:56:16] **Theo Dawson:** I think that's that earned sense of competence.

[00:56:19] **Nate Hagens:** Mm-hmm. Yeah, you mentioned that earlier.

[00:56:21] **Theo Dawson:** You know, that real agency, that all ch- all children can have that sense of agency in their-

[00:56:28] **Nate Hagens:** So it becomes a positive feedback in their learning.

[00:56:31] It's like, oh, I- Yeah ... I did this, and now I can do it again.

[00:56:34] **Theo Dawson:** And it gets you excited. We- I was just in a class the other day with, a group of people who are learning this material, and, you know, they were saying, you know, th- "Oh, you're, you know, you're always talking about how fun it is to learn and the virtuous cycle of learning and the dopamine-opioid cycle and, but learning doesn't have to be fun.

[00:56:53] Sometimes it's damn frustrating and drives me crazy, and I'm still find myself setting these goals that are, like, way beyond what I can do." And, I just said, "Oh yeah, you're a learnaholic. You're somebody who has an earned sense of competence." And so you're willing to be in pain for quite a while learning

# The Great Simplification

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something new in order to get the end of it because you have an earned sense of competence.

[00:57:17] **Nate Hagens:** Interesting.

[00:57:18] **Theo Dawson:** and so you can embrace the pain, just like a baby is learning to walk embraces the pain of falling and gets back up again and tries again, you know?

[00:57:26] **Nate Hagens:** I loved learning, and I still do. when I was at the University of Wisconsin, I graduated with 180 credits, and I only needed 120. I took way more classes than I needed because I really liked them in four years.

[00:57:40] Yeah. So it probably makes sense that I'm a science podcaster now— Yeah, really ... 40 years on. but so Zak, h-help, help us, set this in context of the conversation you and I often have on the broader meta-crisis. Why is what Theo's working on and this conversation so far so relevant to the broader cultural challenges we face?

[00:58:06] **Zak Stein:** There was a paper I wrote some time ago that was just called Education is the Meta-Crisis. Just pointing to the primacy of educational systems as a, what Schmachtenberger would call generative dynamic of all of these different types of outcomes which accumulated create the, meta-crisis. So the idea that without addressing education, and as you said, Nate, kind of like regenerative relationship to the next generation rather than a depleting or degrading the substrate that will take over, right?

[00:58:43] This is-- So you think you can d-degrade the soil, you can degrade the atmosphere, you can degrade the mining, all of that stuff. If you degrade the brains of the next generation, it doesn't matter if you've If you stop degrading the other stuff and you've fixed a bunch of problems, but you haven't fixed this

# The Great Simplification

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problem of systematic generational brain damage from advanced technology, then what have you really won?

[00:59:06] And so there's something more primal about this than anything else. And then if I think from your perspective about what should a civilizational superorganism be oriented to? Should it be oriented to the accumulation of abstract profit, or should it be oriented to the regeneration of its most important substrates?

[00:59:24] Long ago, I think the first podcast we ever did, Nate, I suggested there's a flip here, which is that, oh, the whole civilization is about the next generation and its capacity, rather than the whole civilization being about instrumentalizing that next generation to further the interests of this generation and the accumulation of abstract profit.

[00:59:43] And so a human-centric civilizational system, a human-centric, not in a negative anthropocentric sense, but in the sense of obviously the kids are our most precious resource.

[00:59:54] **Nate Hagens:** On top of the biosphere, and I would assume that ecology and those sorts of things would be part of the education process. Well, it would have to be.

[01:00:02] Yeah, it would have to be the web of life.

[01:00:04] **Theo Dawson:** I think it's inescapable. Yeah,

[01:00:06] **Zak Stein:** but if you save the biosphere and you don't s- and you don't save the, kids, then there's this question of like, what have you-

# The Great Simplification

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[01:00:13] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, exactly. Well, it's-- this is a necessary precursor towards humans, moving from dominion to stewards, on the planet, something like that.

[01:00:27] **Theo Dawson:** Yeah, I th- I think that it's very clear that we're more likely to have the abundance to, to take on stewardship roles, and I think it does take abundance for that because you're not just protecting yourself and your family, right? you're much more likely to have that if you have had the opportunity to be close with other humans, engage with other humans a great deal, learn with other humans, and, you know, collaborate with other humans, and you have that sense of, your own competence and your own ability to be able to solve problems and, deal with situations that are coming up.

[01:01:09] Those kinds of things are gonna lead to that better kind of citizenship.

[01:01:14] **Nate Hagens:** So just diving a little deeper on that, let's-- setting aside the issues of, planetary boundaries and war and financial polarization and technology, let's set those aside for the moment. Can you imagine or paint a picture of 20, 30 years from now, a society of children raised and taught using these methods?

[01:01:40] What would that look like?

[01:01:42] **Theo Dawson:** That's a hard one. I, and I think what it would look like would be maybe democracy would survive For one thing, like I think that this is critical for the survival of democracy. I th- I think democracy is important. Not everybody agrees with me anymore. I finding, I'm finding more people that disagree with me about that than ever before.

[01:02:09] and if democracies survive, there's a better chance that we're going to be taking care of one another. so I think that's a good thing. but I also think that

# The Great Simplification

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there are going to be people who have, because they're coming into the world with that earned sense of competence, they m- they're li- more likely to have the abundance to, to exercise stewardship, to be actually active in exercising stewardship.

[01:02:35] I think a lot of other things need to happen as well, though. I mean, we need to change our economy from one that requires us to consume like crazy in order for our-- the economy to survive. Like it's a very strange thing that we have going on now where the economy is f- completely fighting against what we really need to be and do.

[01:02:55] So maybe they'd be more capable of helping to make that change, you know? Switching from being consumers b- back to being citizens again.

[01:03:04] **Nate Hagens:** In my public talks and in my research, I point out that after basic needs are met, the best things in life are free. But I don't think a lot of people recognize that, and maybe if we had an education system with more clarity and complexity, and especially community and collaboration as opposed to just competing for test scores, that young people from the ground up grow up recognizing that after basic needs are met, most of the best things in life are free.

[01:03:34] And more energy and more money, is good in context, but, when you have very little, having more is huge. When you have a lot, having more isn't really that big a deal, and maybe they're able to f- embody that, as they grow up, and then that changes things. Yeah. I'm just asking.

[01:03:55] **Theo Dawson:** Oh, man, I know for sure that in my life, the period that I spent living off the grid taught me everything I needed to know-

[01:04:03] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah

# The Great Simplification

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[01:04:04] **Theo Dawson:** about what you really need in life, like what's really important, what's worthwhile. Because I was ha- as happy doing that as I've been doing anything else in my life. You know? It's-

[01:04:14] **Nate Hagens:** How long did you live off the grid?

[01:04:15] **Theo Dawson:** Well, my kids were growing up.

[01:04:17] **Nate Hagens:** Wow.

[01:04:18] **Theo Dawson:** Well, actually not for the whole time, but for a big chunk of the time when the kids are growing up.

[01:04:22] And not completely off the grid like you can do now. You can get completely off the grid now. Yeah. I did have friends who were really completely off the grid, but I didn't wanna haul water.

[01:04:31] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:04:32] **Theo Dawson:** but we left-- led the simplest possible kind of life with no media in it whatsoever. I didn't realize it was happening at the time, but th--there's just so much pressure, especially on women in society, to look a certain way and be a certain way.

[01:04:46] And during that time, I didn't-- I wasn't exposed to any of that, none of it. When I came back into the world and saw my first advertisements, my self-image started to change again. And I just thought, "Wow, okay. All of the stuff that's coming at us all the time, it's changing us all the time, because I'm a grown-up and I've had this opportunity not to be like this, and as soon as I'm back in again, I can feel it starting to push at me."

# The Great Simplification

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[01:05:09] **Nate Hagens:** And do you think if we changed our education system that, then adults would be more immune, less, susceptible to advertising and peer pressure and those sort of things because they have that earned sense of competence and such?

[01:05:30] **Theo Dawson:** the kids that I know who've been educated in, the way that we've been talking about are all much less drawn in by all of that stuff.

[01:05:39] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Really?

[01:05:39] **Theo Dawson:** Much less. My grandkids, for example, they got their first computers at age thir- in, their teens, and they had radio at home, but they didn't have any television or other kinds of media or access. and, they could occasionally use their phones, but they've got so many other things they like to do because they've been, you know, doing for themselves.

[01:06:03] Yeah, that's the other thing. Yeah. They're just not drawn in. They don't care. And it's really weird because this is a-- we've got the reversal, like I'm the techno junkie and my grandkids are the Luddites.

[01:06:15] **Nate Hagens:** So for, those listeners who are resonating with your general vision for education, how can they get more involved, and learn more about Lectica's mission?

[01:06:25] **Theo Dawson:** Well, they can go to Lectica's website, and there's just tons of material there. So I would just go play and explore. And there's also a medium blog with my name on it where I discuss some of the, you know, the details of the way that we think about learning. And we do offer courses for people who are interested in, learning more.

# The Great Simplification

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[01:06:45] So we teach that micro V calling. We teach a course that where we just teach people to micro V call and, and build skill maps and, Right, micro vehicles. It does, it sounds boring, but it's actually quite fun.

[01:07:03] **Nate Hagens:** So what, is your hope for all this? Like, what is a, home run for your life's work and this, result in?

[01:07:10] **Theo Dawson:** A home run is that I-- well, I think in my lifetime to see, this way of thinking about education permeating the educational system and having our tool be an important part of helping to make it happen. Yeah. But I think it's gonna be a long process. It's not gonna be an overnight thing. People are gonna g- very gradually, really-- this is really being introduced in a way that we're not pushing it on people.

[01:07:37] We're letting people g-gr- get seduced into it. So it's a, it's the midwife's way. I, I-- and my, vision of the future, the teacher of the future is not just that they're the expert, but they're the midwife.

[01:07:53] **Nate Hagens:** That makes sense to me. Yeah. Zak, do you have any closing thoughts or, words?

[01:07:59] **Zak Stein:** no, this has actually just been fascinating to, to speak a little and actually to hear you and Theo exchange. I think there's actually a couple points where you guys could have kind of dug, deeper. You know, the, future of the economic system is a question mostly about the future of education.

[01:08:17] If I were to make an argument like that, the economics and education are intimately related. I've always understood economics fundamentally as a science of psychology because it's about human behavior. And so there's this deep question about how, different the world would be if the education system

# The Great Simplification

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was different from the perspective just of c- labor markets, job markets, energy usage, a whole bunch of things.

[01:08:41] So I think there's a, lever, there's a lever here, there's an Archimedes lever that we're all looking for. What's the point of best intervention into systems to change future trajectory of systems? Measurement in education is one of those places where if you fundamentally change it, so many things propagate down the line from the nature of that change.

[01:09:02] I

[01:09:02] **Theo Dawson:** like that you're using all the gardening metaphors.

[01:09:05] **Zak Stein:** Yeah.

[01:09:07] **Theo Dawson:** Yeah.

[01:09:08] **Nate Hagens:** To stay with the gardening metaphor, before we have the, full plant, with the fruit, what are the seeds right now? Like, what are the first steps, to make this process more likely to be adopted?

[01:09:22] **Theo Dawson:** There, there's practical things that have to be done to, you know, to get something out into the world.

[01:09:28] you know, strategically right now we're working on grant proposals and other kinds of things to get additional funding, and we also, self-fund ourselves with a n- a for-profit that our nonprofit owns. So getting out, getting, you know, getting more, work in the for-profit sector fund funding the work that we're doing for the children.

[01:09:52] So I-- we're working on a bunch of fronts to, to try to get things moving, and we're bringing in, another person to lead the organization too,

# The Great Simplification

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because we need-- we're bringing in young people to take over for me. We don't wanna make the mistake of, you know, what's here getting reified, or, you know, finding that suddenly I'm gone and that nobody knows what to do, so we're working on doing the transition.

[01:10:15] And that's a big thing, the time capsules and the transition.

[01:10:19] **Nate Hagens:** I think it's, I mean, I, probably was persuaded already, but I do agree with you, Zak, that we can't ultimately change the economic system unless we change the education system. So thank you both for, your lifelong observation and efforts, on this front.

[01:10:40] And, do you have any closing words, Theo, then Zak?

[01:10:44] **Theo Dawson:** Well, something has come into my mind that I would like to, say, and that is that, we've really taken the measurement thing seriously, and so we don't want our ruler to be owned by anybody. We want it to be able to be shared with everyone, so we are, going to-- it's going to live in a trust and, can only, and will only be able to be used to support development of human beings and will n-not ever enrich an individual.

[01:11:15] So there's economic change.

[01:11:16] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Zak,

[01:11:19] **Zak Stein:** we'll give you the closing word, my friend. I would just say this conversation, I mean, we did, we touched on AI, but we didn't really double-click and go into AI, and I believe that this conversation is essential to that because what Theo is describing was an environment where writing and conversation and reflection that is human to human was technologically enabled, where the

# The Great Simplification

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experience of deepening with others in your complexity and your sanity and your clarity is helped by a technology.

[01:11:53] And so I just wanna note that this, all of the movements of AI in school, we could have spent the whole time talking about the dangers of that. Instead, we've talked about something that would be a solution to that, which would give opportunities for kids to practice writing, practice reflecting, practice interacting, deepening complexity, deepening clarity.

[01:12:12] So I just wanna note that, This is a conversation about a technological, a technology, a technologically enabled future for education that's fundamentally positive, where there's accumulated evidence over a century that this is a good thing to do, rather than some completely irresponsible rollout of AI technology in schools for which there's no evidence.

[01:12:32] So I just want to kind of end on that point of that it couldn't be more crucial to try to find a way to get people seduced into using these tools.

[01:12:39] **Nate Hagens:** Well, this conversation was a product of yours and mine, one and a half hour conversation on the problems with AI and education. And this was one of your suggestions.

[01:12:47] We have to talk to Theo Dawson and here we are. So thank you both for your time and your work and fingers crossed that we can make some change in this direction.

[01:12:58] **Theo Dawson:** Thank you for a great conversation. It's been really fun.

[01:13:01] **Nate Hagens:** To be continued, my friends. If you'd like to learn more about this episode, please visit [thegreatsimplification.com](http://thegreatsimplification.com) for references and show notes.

# The Great Simplification

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[01:13:12] From there, you can also join our Hilo community and subscribe to our Substack newsletter. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media and produced by Misty Stinnett and Lizzie Sirianni. Our production team also includes Leslie Batlutz, Brady Heien, Julia Maxwell, Gabriella Slayman, and Grace Brunfeld.

[01:13:35] Thank you for listening, and we'll see you on the next episode