

The Future of Education

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Traditional education as we know it is in the middle of great change. In recent years the classical path of attending university immediately following high school has been going through some change as people opt to do other things before settling into 4 or 5 years on a university campus. Some people are traveling, others are working for a while, and still others simply search for direction. In Europe, university education has usually been delayed especially for men as they are conscripted into the armed services for several years following high school. In North America, the average age of an undergraduate student is well over 25 indicating that there are more 'adult' students than students right out of high school. Asia has been slow to advocate adult education at the university level, making this region ripe for the biggest change.

Asians have always been proponents of lifetime learning. Many of the arts of Asia take lifetimes to master, and so there has always been a great many people taking on a discipline over the course of their lives. The great artistic traditions of the East such as martial arts, sumi-e ink painting, and flower arranging have always been treated as lifetime arts as opposed to something studied for a few years and then a student graduates. Of course there are certificates of mastery and teaching licenses, but these more or less represent the beginning of deep learning. Ask any master of an art and they invariably tell you that they are still learning it.

Formal university education in general is constantly searching for newer and better ways to promulgate teaching and facilitate learning. Unfortu-

nately these altruistic ideals often become muddled by greed by the almighty desire for cash. Make no mistake, profits are what drive educational institutions, just as that drive that world. Any new successful program for teaching will have to come with a viable business plan. All new technology has the ability to be applied in the realm of education. Over the past 50 years, educational programs have been incorporated into all means of broadcasting. Television and radio classes are relatively commonplace, these mediums have yet to really unlock the power of distance learning, limiting themselves mostly to local communities.

There are two main ways that educational institutions can take advantage of modern times to develop further. The first is to utilize the emerging technology of the internet to offer learning programs to those with the ability to study via the net. Distance programs are nothing new in the world. They have been around for well over 100 years, and is a perfectly acceptable way of learning. The second is for educators to severely alter the philosophy or psychology of how they teach and what they expect of students. Education should be a thing available to anyone who wants it. Is the current system of limiting the entrance of students, cramming information into their heads, and having them spit out info on a test the best means of selecting and evaluating abilities?

Just exactly what is a doctorate, anyway? The truth is that a Ph.D. is really nothing other than a person who has studied a lot. It is more about discipline and study than about an amazingly gifted intellect. In fact, most holders of Ph.D.'s do not have unusually high I.Q.'s or especially gifted intellectual capacity. They are simply people who have put in the time behind research reading and writing and have consequently become expert in a field.

In the near future it will be very common for universities to give instruction and even advanced degrees over the internet. Going forward, the real power of the internet will lie in its ability to empower individual people to accom-

plish goals previously unavailable to them. This movement is about the transfer of knowledge and power to more of the common people. Institutions are reluctant to give up power, but those that are the first to do so will reap the benefits of networking, which is exponential growth. If the network of college graduates increases then its value will also increase, thereby profiting universities. Although this may appear to be a contradiction, it is how the universe works; a basic idea of physics. If a door is jammed, it won't open no matter how hard one pulls on it. The solution to this stuck door is often to push on it, which looks like the exact opposite of the goal, but a push usually achieves the desired effect. Relinquishing control of one thing often leads to untold benefits.

Universities should design degree programs over the internet so that they have potential to attract more students. The control that a university has over its students is that it requires them to attend classes and sit for exams. It also exerts power with strict entrance requirements and the ability to confer degrees. Instead of closing the doors to students who may have a difficult time passing an entrance exam, there should be more of an open door policy. In other words, let those study who want to study. Why close the door? Students will still have to do they kind of study necessary to gain knowledge and graduate, but this will increase the potential amount of people with broader knowledge. Too often, educators at all levels, but especially at the university level, are not so fond of sharing knowledge as they are of guarding it. Guarding it from what? From the very people who have an interest in it so that it can be passed on to the next generation?

The internet offers the freedom to study whenever a person wants. Taking on a large class load so that they can put university life behind them and get on with their lives is often the goal of students today. Why else do we load up on classes? So we can be burdened with a group of tests at the end of a semester? Distance learning over the net offers a wonderful chance to let students learn at their own rate of learning. Often, family responsibilities lead to work responsibilities that lead to a person having little time to

improve his or her knowledge. They may steal away some time to read books or pursue some other sources of study, and degrees over the internet are just some kind of formal recognition of this. Why do we seem to be so guarded with our knowledge?

Why is there a perceived time limit on the ability to finish a university degree? There is no logical reason for this presumption. A university degree does not have to be completed in a limited period of time. What does it matter if a degree is completed at the age of 21 or 31? This is a curious question. Who has decreed that we must stuff our heads full of facts in a short period of time? The roots of this thought come largely from Confucian thought where tests and their results determined the lot of a person and also in Platonic thought where test results signify a person's place in society. Let's face it, these are antiquated ideas designed in a period in human history that was grossly different from the modern world. They were designed so that there was control and order. So that society was groomed. Could it be that by trying to control things that we are barking up the wrong tree? Things do tend to take care of themselves, but since there seems to be no end to human stupidity (a paraphrase from Einstein), control measures were adopted to keep things in check.

It is our own stupidity as a species that keeps us bound to living with certain expressed and tacit rules. Without rules who would pick up the trash, do the dishes or clean the toilets? The answer, of course, lies in the mirror, but most people cannot bear to clean up after themselves. With all this talk of assuming responsibility for one's actions floating around at every corner, it is difficult to really find this put into practice. There is a school of thought that regards rules as needless and that things will get taken care of as needed. Probably the truth lies somewhere in the middle of the strict enforcement of rules and no rules at all.

What is the true purpose of education? Most university students of the modern world answer that they are at university so that they can procure

a good job after graduation. So in the world today it is economics that drives education, and this comes from all directions. Students study so that they can get good jobs, teachers teach so that they can earn a living, and institutions exist so that they can make a profit. Most people are aware of these things. Students will not receive graduation diplomas until their tuition has been paid in full, but does this change at all the knowledge that a student has learned? Most people would say, "It's the way of the world". Big deal! It may be the way of the world, but it certainly needs improving. From where and when are these improvements going to come?

Economic reality in education of the present day cannot be ignored. There are always ulterior motives and hidden agendas in every plan. How magnanimous or inimical the background is should be the thing that needs to be somehow understood. Whether based on greed or something more altruistic, in the end success should be measured by how many people are able to learn the kind of things that they want, or the overall literacy level of the population.

The expansion of the classroom to the internet will provide an excellent distance learning forum. Students will be able to communicate directly with teachers via e-mail and homepages with what exists today. This communication will become even better when distance learners will be able to use the video phone. Distance learning classes are already designed. In fact it has been quite easy to earn university credit by correspondence for years. The list of universities offering distance learning and e-classes is long enough to fill a book.

Interestingly, although many undergraduate degrees are offered via correspondence courses from prestigious universities especially in the U.S. and England, hardly any schools offer advanced degrees such as Master's and Ph.D.'s through distance learning. There are several innovative schools that offer such degrees, but most of the quality ones insist on some sort of residency requirement. This is not a bad idea, but it isn't really necessary.

Even with all the advances in technology to date, there are really few if any schools offering advanced degrees wholly over the internet. Why not? It must be a combination of many reasons such as the reluctance to change, institutional ego-mania, lack of competent instructors who understand how to teach over the net, and inexperience. There are many courses available over the net, but not degrees yet. Institutions seem to be unwilling to test the waters. Which university will step up and take the lead?

Designing degree programs for the internet is really not that difficult of a task. Schools could slowly warm up to it based on how many quality universities offer correspondence degrees. Precedence has been set by such schools as California State University, Dominguez Hills and several top universities in England which have been granting distance degrees at the master's level for some time. Of course, there would be several courses of study where it would be difficult to pursue advanced degrees such as medicine and some other sciences for example. For other subjects, like humanities, business, or even engineering, the internet offers a viable setting for learning.

Schools could set up instruction in several ways. The most traditional way is to have teachers on staff of that particular university issue a syllabus with reading and writing homework assignments. Mostly there are time limits on these assignments just as in traditional classroom settings. A second way to pair up instructors with students is to let the students find an expert Ph.D. teacher from any other institution in the world in a particular subject, and then pay this instructor a stipend for each student. This is a good way of learning since students can go to authorities in specific fields that may not be on staff at the university at which they are enrolled. It also extends the capabilities of the university to offer the best instruction possible by employing the most expert people.

In the future, education needs to change the way that students are accessed. Tests being the traditional manner by which a student is judged, perhaps the

time has come for better methods to be used to see that knowledge has been passed. Tests, especially multiple choice, are a really poor way to judge learning. For the most part, students who aim to pass tests are just doing that. They study not so much to learn, but to complete the task of writing a successful test. Often, the cramming that goes along with testing lets a person pass the test, but the knowledge is not really absorbed in such a way that the student can use it at a later date. In other words, the information is soon forgotten.

Alternative ideas to using tests as a means of judgment would be to have students demonstrate knowledge. Often times, demonstrations create a feeling in a student that they are showing that they have learned something as opposed to the feeling created by tests which is more of a defensive way to prove that they can do something. In demonstrations, there is not so much an idea of success versus failure as there is a presentation of what has been learned. They put students in a less defensive position and more in one of an authority. For as the learning of the student progresses, there will be instances where students may find better solutions than the teacher.

A good teacher feels comfortable with letting students do superior work at times. After all, the goals of teaching are not to suppress knowledge but to spread it. Overall, the teacher is in a seat of having amassed more knowledge if by nothing else than experience, but during a course of apprenticeship, there rightfully should be flashes where students can do work that is better than the teacher. This is the transferring of knowledge. Take for instance the idea of a martial arts student. In the beginning there is no way that the student can apply an effective throw to the teacher. After diligent practice a day may come when suddenly the student does something that really works on the teacher. At this point the great teacher recognizes that knowledge has really been passed and should be happy. There are those egotistical teachers that would not want to admit that they have lost to a student, but realists understand that anything can happen on any given day, and accept happily that there is another person in the world with an

improved ability.

It is said that for real learning to take place students will retain information and have forgotten where they learned it. Realizing this, the best teachers instruct in a manner where the students do not even know that they are being taught something. If information is relayed to students, but they cannot remember where they have learned it, then true transference of knowledge has taken place. In fact, within certain educational circles, not trying to achieve a level of correctness when going through the process of learning yields a much faster rate of learning.

Teachers can judge the level of a student without tests. It is the job a teacher to not only attempt to impart knowledge, but to judge whether it has happened. A certain degree of competency must be achieved so that the student can begin to operate without the supervision of a teacher. The goal of teaching should be to bring the student to a level of proficiency to where they can work by themselves. Students need to be able to work independently. By interacting with students in various ways over the course of instruction, teachers can come to an accurate assessment without having to put students through the agony of an exam. The testing process has made teachers lazy. Student levels should be able to be judged by the interactions of the student/teacher relationship. This may create more of a burden on a teacher, but it is the nature of the profession.