Online Learning Brings Democracy In Education

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"Once we have computer outlets in every home, each of them hooked up to enormous libraries where anyone can ask any question and be given answers, be given reference materials, be something you're interested in knowing, from an early age, however silly it might seem to someone else... that's what YOU are interested in, and you can ask, and you can find out, and you can do it in your own home, at your own speed, in your own direction, in your own time... Then, everyone would enjoy learning. Nowadays, what people call learning is forced on you, and everyone is forced to learn the same thing on the same day at the same speed in class, and everyone is different.

That is a quote from futurist and science fiction author Isaac Asimov in 1988. It does seem very relevant to me as someone that never really connected with the formal education system. Sure, I have qualifications and a degree from a UK university but it seemed like a bad fit for me as I learn in a very empirical and hands-on way.

Even when I started my career some 16 years ago it was hard to get human resources (HR) people to see the potential beyond judging the institution I attended and the non-traditional course that I took (Applied Psychology and Computing - AI, robots, mapping the brain and linguistics).

Not much has changed today when it comes time for new graduates to go through the hiring process with larger companies. It seems, from the conversations I have had, that they still have to encounter a lot of closed minds that focus on what, when and where you did you education vs. the potential that lies within you.

Having said that, it seems like the HR selection process does work as in Canada. About 1.4 million more graduates are working in professional and management careers now than 20 years ago, with an additional 600,000 in technical and administrative occupations in Canada. This trend has continued even during the economic slowdown.

According to Statistics Canada's latest Labor Force Survey, in May 2012 there were 613,000 more jobs for university graduates than there were in May 2008, at the outset of the recession -- a 15 per cent increase. There was an increase in employment for university graduates throughout the recession and there was quite strong job growth for university graduates since early in 2009.

Even with this growth, I still see a real challenge. There is untapped talent in the ranks of wannabe students that find it difficult in physically attending reputable (or widely recognized and accepted) institutions or taking on huge debt from formal education. That means that people and the employers that can benefit from their skills will be missing out in both the short and long-term.

Sure, we see examples of go-getters not needing formal education and they have been able to change the world. In the ranks of famous dropouts are Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Buckminster Fuller, James Cameron and Mark Zuckerberg. They have all certainly done well, and with their own ventures, however they are not exactly representative of even the smartest in wider society.
The advancements in online learning have meant that more and more high-quality education is available to all Canadians and students around the world. In this article I want to highlight some visionary companies that are pursuing education that takes society towards a more democratic approach to education.

Close to home, here in B.C., we have educational institutions that are really pushing boundaries in online course development and moderation. Last year UBC Continuing Studies approached me to develop and teach the face-to-face Social Media Metrics course. After a couple of times in running that they then approached me to extend that to the online community through a formally developed course. I'm not a professor, or even that academic, but have had success in business and use techniques that seem to work so I gave it a go.

This has provided me with the unique perspective of how hard it is to create and deliver online courses that demand the best from the student that is studying remotely. In fact, it seems more intense and informative with a range of discussion that face-to-face courses can have. The Social Media Metrics course that was developed can be found here, if you want to take a closer look (it is part of a wider Social Media accreditation).

In the wider world there are a couple of organizations really pushing boundaries and democratizing education in academic and digital fields.

Coursera says it is "committed to making the best education in the world freely available to any person who seeks it." It was founded by computer science professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller from Stanford University. They are providing a breadth of courses that would make any university proud.

There is all manner of subjects from Sociology to Cryptography to Natural Language Processing to Finance. Lecturers and contributors from Stanford, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Vanderbilt, Toronto and others have signed up to provide free courses. It has become popular and successful with 64,000 students in 190 countries and over 1.5 million enrollments so far.

Daphne Koller even provides an insightful look at online learning in this TED Talk.

I work in advertising with a specialism in digital and social sites and applications so I became very excited about Codecademy last year. This is bit of a different beast to both UBC Continuing Studies and Coursera. Learning online, using exercises and tuition will help you to begin building great websites, games, and apps. You can learn Java, Python, Ruby and other coding languages that create the foundation our digitally connected world.

Now here is a challenge for organizations. Can they trust people that have gained education in this way? Will they be good employees? Is the traditional 'university experience' essential in addition to qualifications? My opinion is that if the student has stuck diligently to education of this sort, and can apply it, organizations can be
confident in their choice of employee.

To hire successfully, organizations will need to spend more time looking at levels of motivation and potential than just reading a resume. HR professionals have to work harder in knowing a good employee from bad and build diligent processes for selection that include experts and even pre-job testing. They then have to trust these processes, and their instincts somewhat, take a leap of faith and find the best candidate independent of where they got their education. With this we will support democracy in education, have stronger, more innovative companies and even support the building of a stronger economy.

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