

The Flat World Is Now Open

Time to embrace the power of informal education • BY CURTIS BONK



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For millions of people, the world began to look a bit flatter in the spring of 2005. On May 2, 2005, I opened to Page 4 of the “Money” section of USA Today and found a review of Thomas Friedman’s new book, *The World is Flat*.

Friedman made the case for 10 forces that leveled the world from an economic standpoint, along with a powerful triple convergence consisting of new economic players from India, China and eastern European countries; an equalized playing field brought about by collaborative technologies; and an increasingly horizontal and less hierarchical set of management processes. These were the critical “P” words of business — players, playing field and management processes.

Two weeks later, a friend sent me a link to a video of a talk Friedman gave at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Within seconds, I could hear Friedman explain his views directly without the constraints of text. A couple months after that, I ordered the corresponding CD to listen to in my car. Last summer, while out jogging, I listened to an audio recording of his book using a 2-ounce, preloaded device called the Playaway.

Those were my learning choices. There are many other ways to take in the contents of the book. You can watch YouTube videos posted by the United Way of Greater New Haven, as well as insightful interview clips with Charlie Rose. You can browse MIT OpenCourseWare classes — such as “Media Education and the Marketplace” — that use his book. You can read book reviews on Amazon.com or LibraryThing, scan any of thousands of relevant blog posts or listen to related podcasts. You can download a set of discussion questions from the book’s official home page and, while you’re there, make suggestions for the as-yet-unwritten Chapter 18 of Friedman’s latest book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*.

The Web provides countless options for learning. Anyone can now learn anything from anybody else at any time. But, in education environments, there is a different set of “P” words, namely: piping or infrastructure; pages of content; and a participatory learning culture.

You need all three for significant educational transformation. This triple convergence is providing previously unimaginable educational opportunities. Open

education, open educational resources, OpenCourseWare, open information communities and open source software rule the day.

How can we tell the world is open? It is open at the corporate level when IBM employees can gather together for informal meetings and conferences in Second Life, or when Deloitte employees around the globe conduct competitions to create YouTube videos explaining why they work there. It is even more open when all 150,000 Best Buy employees can contribute ideas on business practices, training approaches, employee benefits and industry trends to a company wiki.

It is open at the college level when students at places such as the University of Central Florida and the University of Illinois at Springfield can decide between face-to-face, blended and fully online versions of the same course. There are entirely new forms of openness when incoming students at Abilene Christian University receive a free Apple iPhone or iPod Touch to use in myriad ways on campus.

It is clearly open at the K-12 level, considering that Adora Svitak, age 11, can present a writing lesson from Redmond, Wash., via Web conferencing to other students. The doors are pushed still more open when scientists in Antarctica are posting “ice stories” to their blogs and responding to comments from children in the Philippines. At the same time, inexpensive mobile devices from Stanford’s Pocket School project can help young children in Latin America and Africa learn valuable literacy skills.

Now, imagine a family taking a five-month trip through the Caribbean on their new sailboat. The world is wide open when their 16-year-old daughter takes academic tests proctored by dock captains and retired teachers when in port; uploads completed homework assignments to her teachers back home; and downloads new ones to master at sea. And with an iPod or MP4 player, a teacher always can be in her pocket.

Web technologies are continuing to push the limits of learning and education. During this complex and exciting transition, it is time to make sense of the more open and informal education opportunities in front of each of us. Global economics may be flatter, but learning and education are much more open. Open up and enjoy it. **CLO**