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The Training World is Wide Open

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As we entered the 21st century, Thomas Friedman got the entire planet fired up when he rediscovered the world was flat; something known for millennia prior to Columbus but somehow forgotten. He even wrote a book on the topic. Millions of people in government, military, and corporate training settings discussed, debated, and criticized or sang the praises of the flatter world he was talking about. Unfortunately, the flat metaphor fails to adequately explain what is happening this century in training and education environments.

In fact, on the first page of the third edition of "The World is Flat," Friedman admits the question he asked most often when traveling to speak about the book, is what parents should tell their children about this increasingly flat or global world.

The educational world, however, is more open. There are open educational resources, open source software tools, OpenCourseWare initiatives, and open information communities. Many doors are being opened for learners in every corner of the planet.

Friedman focuses on new economic players, an equalized playing field, and more flattened management processes. The three P's impacting the training and education arena are **p**iping or technological infrastructure, trillions of **p**ages of online content, and a **p**articipatory learning culture. To make his point, Friedman documented ten key trends that are converging to impact economic trade, entire cultures, and individual empowerment. In education, there is a similar, though distinctly different set of ten trends which I document in my book, "The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education." As noted below, they spell the acronym "WE-ALL-LEARN."

Ten Openers: (WE-ALL-LEARN)

1.**W**eb Searching in the World of e-Books
2.**E**-Learning and Blended Learning
3.**A**vailability of Open Source and Free Software
4.**L**everaged Resources and OpenCourseWare
5.**L**earning Object Repositories and Portals
6.**L**earner Participation in Open Information Communities
7.**E**lectronic Collaboration
8.**A**lternate Reality Learning
9.**R**eal-Time Mobility and Portability
10.**N**etworks of Personalized Learning

Training experiences have become increasingly mobile, virtual, collaborative, on-demand, and personal. The second trend, the emergence of fully online and blended learning, is perhaps the most obvious in business settings. There are mountains of online courses on leadership, basic skills, sales training, computer applications, compliance training, job related skills, and customer service skills. In government offices, e-learning topics often rise in prominence due to legislative action.

Government agencies and non-profit organizations often gain attention by responding to global events and crises with online courses and modules in disaster relief and community rebuilding. The needs are many, and the offerings are extensive.

With the trend toward free and open access to educational resources and the sharing of such resources beyond one's organization or institution, self-directed learning is on the rise, especially in corporate training. It seems corporations are giving learners more opportunity to learn what, when, where, and how they like. No place has this trend been more evident than at Saudi Aramco in early 2007. Saudi Aramco has more than 54,000 employees representing 56 nationalities. It is extremely diverse. Many people at Saudi Aramco are involved in e-learning and blended learning across the company—including those from computer security, HRD, leadership training, employee relations and training.

In a corporate e-learning forum in February 2007 at Saudi Aramco, self-directed learning was the buzzword that had everyone taking notice. During the forum, self-directed learning courses and course completions were shown. Next, self-directed learning completion rates were displayed by location. After, there were self-directed learning projections for the coming year.

Let's step back for a moment and realize why this is happening. Self-directed learning saves on instructor costs while simultaneously giving the learner choice and perhaps personal learning goals. People can now learn from Saudi Aramco training resources when they have the time and energy to complete them, not when artificially assigned to do so.

These employees are in the throes of this training transformation, forcing them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Learning via Web resources and technologies is a key component of this transformation. Learning opportunities are being designed and made available today for the skill base of tomorrow. The plans and visions made by Saudi Aramco to equip learners with self-directed learning skills is in sync with 21st century learning that each of us experience daily.

It is highly apparent self-directed learning is a key facet of the employee training visions and plans of this oil industry giant, as it now is for many other companies around the globe. The resources, activities, modules, and courses, tailored for the Saudi Aramco people, are available on demand and when needed.

To help develop instructor moderated initiatives and programs, millions of dollars are being poured in by the Saudi government for e-learning in university settings. To highlight the importance of e-learning, in March 2009, the country sponsored the First International Conference on e-learning and distance learning in the capital city of Riyadh. Many famous international speakers were brought in to shed light on new directions the country and Middle East region as a whole might take. Saudi Arabia is just one place where training and education departments and institutions of higher learning are reflecting on how to offer learning options and more open learning resources. However, there is potential for confusion. The ways to track and monitor the progress of those in self-directed learning pursuits, as well as instructor moderated ones, are not yet fully understood. Various forms of e-learning will be increasingly prominent in both corporate training as well as university settings. It will not end there, however. With the richness of the Web, e-learning will impact each of us in nearly every learning area or topic we pursue.

Of course, interesting e-learning initiatives are just one result of this more open learning world. Many educators contend self-directed e-learning courses and programs lack interactivity and engagement. Too often the learner simply clicks through Web pages without thinking. The Web 2.0, however, brings new learning opportunities.

As indicated, there is a trend toward more collaborative, mobile, virtual, and personalized learning environments where the learner contributes to the learning resources instead of simply passively browsing through them. The world of learning is opening up beyond the boring browsing of the Web 1.0 to a more engaging and interactive experience. And with open educational resources, any company and any person within that company can create valuable online resources the entire world can use, remix, and share.

With the proliferation of online resources and technologies opening learning to thousands more learners each day, there is excitement for continued training and education throughout the lifespan, from birth to retirement and beyond. Training departments now have momentous decisions in front of them about how open or closed they will make their courses and materials, as well as how much to rely on employee generated content instead of strictly using prepackaged materials. Management also needs to consider the possible partnerships that might be created with other organizations and institutions that have already placed their training and education materials on the Web free to the world. How will you take advantage of this more open world?

Curt Bonk is a writer, speaker, and consultant as well as a professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University. He is the author of three recent books: "The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education" (2009), "Empowering Online Learning: 100+ Activities for Reading, Reflecting, Displaying, and Doing" (2008), and "The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs" (2006). For more information, visit http://mypage.iu.edu/~cjbonk/.

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