BOOK REVIEW- THE WORLD IS OPEN: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education

Posted by Michael F. Shaughnessy on July 17, 2009 at 3:30pm
View Michael F. Shaughnessy's blog

Book Review : The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education
Author : Curtis J. Bonk
Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Many years ago, there was a television commercial in which they said something like
"Reggie Jackson knows baseball" or something to that effect. Maybe it was someone else, but I am going to use that line to describe Curt Bonk. "Curt knows the Internet". And in some other commercial, advertising insurance company E. F. Hutton, they said, "When so and so talks, people listen." The same is true of Curt. When Curt talks (or writes) people listen. And with good reason. In true John Naisbitt like fashion, Curt discusses the trends that he sees on the Internet and how they relate to education. He paints a vast panorama of what is occurring in the U.S. and around the world. And he takes a page from Alvin Toffler's book about Future Shock and tells us in no uncertain terms what is going on and the shock that will be felt over the next 10, 20 years as the Internet becomes a more accepted channel for learning and information procurement and dissemination.

The Internet is already a vast storehouse of knowledge, information, data, statistics and literature. If I wanted to learn about the Renaissance, the Reformation, the War of the Roses or the 100 Years War, there would be plenty to occupy my time over the next 20 or 30 years.

Curt uses the mnemonic WE-ALL-LEARN to describe what he believes are the issues
facing the Internet and it's use as a vehicle for learning, teaching, and information sharing. Some of his points I agree with, and some I have concerns with, but as someone who has been around the Information Superhighway, and who has spoken at conferences around the world, Curt has his finger on the pulse of most of the issues. The ten domains (or what he calls Openers) are:

Web Searching in the World of E-Books
E-Learning and Blended Learning
Availability of Open Source and Free Software
Leveraged Resources and Open Course Ware
Learning Object Repositories and Portals
Learner Participation in Open Information Communities
Electronic Collaboration
Alternate Reality Learning
Real-Time Mobility and Portability
Networks of Personalized Learning

Curt devotes a chapter to each of these domains. He provides some stories about people who have impacted the field, and provides a bit of history regarding the growth of all of these areas. Since he knows some of the key players in the field, he is able to cast a bit of history on the growth and development of these areas, and provide some understanding of the issues involved.

He is like a person who stands aside and watches the first Bibles coming off Gutenberg's printing press and understands the implications. Or someone who was there when I believe it was Edison said "What hath God Wrought.". In each of the above chapters, Curt extols the gargantuan growth of the Internet and the exponential aspects of it. He describes the potential for underdeveloped countries. He describes what is happening currently and delves a bit into certain issues (copyright) that deserve a bit more attention.

Having said a good number of positive things about the book and Curt's rendition of a bit of the history, I now have to provide a bit of balanced perspective and discuss what Curt either chose to leave out or did not address. Some of these may be termed "nasty words" by some individuals out there in the field, but they have to be addressed nonetheless.
Some of these issues Curt tends to gloss over, in his endeavor to show how the internet and its usefulness has grown by leaps and bounds. But I will voice the words nonetheless.

1) Accountability- Along with the word accountability comes the word accuracy. For those of us who are scientists, empiricists and data driven junkies, there is the concern about accountability. While people can learn Mandarin if they want on the Internet, that is fine. If someone wants to teach Mandarin, based on some Skype conversations over a month's time, I have concerns.

2) Academic Integrity- I am somewhat, note I say somewhat, skeptical as to what is meaningful learning and how meaningful learning is measured. It is all well and good to learn as much as one can about the world, art, literature, history, science, archeology, and music. But when course credit and grades are assigned, I have some real concerns. Having both taken and taught on line classes, I am aware of the wide disparity in requirements and the wide disparity in the quality of the courses that I at least have taken from several universities. Some have lengthy dull boring discussion boards and others have power pointed students to death, and still others are nothing more than independent studies on line. Who is policing and monitoring academic coursework is a concern. Instructional tech and educational tech people e-mail me with their concerns as to quality control. Curt, I remain concerned.

3) Certification. I have some concerns about how some universities are attempting to provide an entire program over the Internet. Having once taken EMT courses, I know the rigor with which one has to demonstrate competence to practice. I am somewhat concerned about certification via the Internet as a barber, beautician, or data entry person. I do know that CISCO has standards of excellence and they should be commended for maintaining those standards of excellence.

4) Quality Control- Although the issue is cursorily discussed, this domain needs to be examined more deeply, critically and empirically. Certainly, a lot of learning can take place on the web. People can research Wookie's Hole in Great Britain as well as use the British Library. Museums can be accessed, as well as the articles Barack Obama wrote for the Harvard Law Review (I have not found any yet, but I will keep looking)

In a small section at the very end of the book, he does address the "deadly dozen" i.e. The winners and losers on the Internet, web access limitations, quality control issues, the issues surrounding plagiarism, and cheating, lazy learners, copyright, access issues for the disabled, help for digital natives and teacher training. Each of these topics is problematic for many and many more pages need to be written about coping with these issues.

Bonk's book is well written. Writers to be could learn a great deal by imitating his style, soft spoken manner and organization. He does tend to be an enthusiastic, excited energetic advocate for the internet, but then leaves only a sentence or two at the end of each chapter to discuss the failings and foibles of the web. He comprehensively covers all of the various aspects of the Internet and related organizations (MERLOT, GLEF, DEEP, MMOG's, CORE, RSS FEEDS, PMP's)

I would be happy to be Curt's Chumby, but he neglected to mention the work of James Gee in games and Zack Waggoner in terms of Avatar's. He does mention Stephen Downes and acknowledges the difficulties of the average person trying to keep up with all of the new innovations on the Internet. Yes, the Internet is the wave of the future. It may be the "final frontier" of education.

But concerns remain about competence, certification, quality, and academic integrity. I may go to my grave discussing these issues, and I may have missed Curt's main points about the wonderful world of the web and the potentialities for education and educating the under-developed countries, but often certain things just need to be said. And while Curt knows the Internet and is enthusiastic about it, many years ago, people thought that the blackboard, radio, the t.v., slides and film strips, C.D.'s were all the magic bullet to facilitate and expedite education.

For more information : GO TO :

http://worldisopen.com/
and
http://mypage.iu.edu/~cjbonk/