

## Entering the Golden Age of Education

Bill Sams

[sams.bill@gmail.com](mailto:sams.bill@gmail.com)

740-591-7158

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Free universal knowledge is the most valuable resource in the world. Knowledge is an economic good that becomes more valuable as more people “consume” it. The distribution of knowledge is in the process of transitioning from a scarce resource to a commodity. The impact of this change upon the value of human capital in the world is nearly unimaginable. This change to free distribution of knowledge has the potential to dramatically improve lives and economies around the world. We are on the threshold of a global revolution in education that could make this one of the most exciting times in human history.

Sal Khan, founder and faculty of one of the Khan Academy, had a vision in 2009 of “educating the world”. With the Khan Academy now educating a million students a month, his vision is becoming a reality. This initiative has been followed by edX, the partnership of MIT and Harvard, which has a mission to educate one billion people. At the same time, Stanford- based Coursera has launched and in less than six months this program has enrolled 740,000 students. These are the vanguards of a wave of education that is sweeping across the world with the potential to change one of the foundation stones of human existence, knowledge.

In the last six months the economic model of a scarcity of teaching resources justifying a rationing of education has been changed to a free commodity model of unlimited availability and world-class quality education. This changes everything.

For the first time in human history there is the possibility of every person in the world being able to optimize their learning potential. Education is rapidly moving from an individual craft to a global commodity. The scarcity barriers of limited admission, prerequisites, cost, place, space, and time are all being removed. The only limitations are Internet access and a person’s own time.

This decade will see the last generation of students economically shackled by the indentured servitude of student loans. Students will be freed from the lockstep of fixed curricula delivered at a set time and in a set place.

Imagine the potential for the entire world to share a common experience in a subject with a single teacher who not only teaches them but who also will teach generations of their children. Sal Khan may well be the first of a few who will reach this potential.

Imagine the economic impact on developing countries when they have local engineers who trained online with MIT and Harvard courses and who can now solve local community problems of water, roads, and sanitation. Imagine the additional economic impact on those developing countries when other members of their communities are acquiring valuable skills for jobs in a global virtual market. As Milton Friedman described the world as flat in terms of business, the world is now becoming flat in terms of knowledge. Countries that have less than world-class courses in all of their colleges and universities will fall behind.

Up until now the discussion of the global revolution in free online world-class courses has been focused on an organization-centric view of how the traditional educational system will be affected. This is the wrong viewpoint. We should instead take a student/customer-centric view. Rather than asking the question of how do we get more money for more education, the better question to ask is how do we get more education for less money. This makes it an issue of productivity rather than cost. And with the new knowledge distribution models of Khan, edX and Coursera, the cost to the consumer is only his or her time. And with each of these efforts working with hundreds of thousands of customers, the programs can focus on how to continually reduce the time cost of their customers through more effective delivery techniques. The productivity lessons of business and industry are finally reaching education.

In addition to the global revolution in free online world-class content there is a companion revolution brewing in the Mozilla badges project. Once business and industry appreciates and embraces the concept of badges that define the exact skills required for success in a given job, the unknown risk of a vague generalized degree will become untenable. The content of a basic liberal arts degree has hardly changed in a hundred years. Badges requirements can be changed instantly to reflect changing skill needs. Badges will offer individuals at all age levels the potential and ability to re-enter or move up in the job market.

These new models of free world-class online content and badges as skill assessment systems will take root first in the developing countries which have a massive need for knowledge and are not restrained by tenured vested interests. However, parents and students in developed countries will quickly raise the issue of whether what their college or university provides at exorbitant cost is actually better than what is now available free. Many colleges and universities will have a difficult time providing a convincing justification of their superiority. If students can take online courses for free they should be allowed to test out of traditional courses with full credit for only the cost of assessment. This would dramatically reduce the cost of traditional education while accelerating the degree completion time for students.

When viewed from the perspective of free content and inexpensive skill assessment and their potential to tremendously increase the value of human capital, the thought of limiting or charging for knowledge now seems antiquated.

The current educational system of rationing knowledge is becoming obsolete. It has served well until this last decade but we now need to realize that it is time for the traditional system to renew itself and to integrate and embrace new models.

*Bill Sams is a commissioner on the eTech Ohio Commission and an Executive in Residence at Ohio University. His latest efforts include the production of the movie [EPIC 2020](http://epic2020.org), which predicts the demise of the traditional higher education model.*

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