Freedom and Empowerment:
An Essay on the Next Step for Education and Technology

by James Shimabukuro

Despite the relative stasis that we are currently experiencing in the development of online education (Sodders 2004; Zemsky and Massey 2004, 31-32), I am convinced that dramatic changes will occur, sooner rather than later. Online instruction has grown about as much as it possibly can within current educational structures. We are at the point where something has to give: Either schools will stay the same and leave online efforts at a standstill, or our concept of school will change and allow online instruction to grow.

The primary obstacle to growth is our unwillingness to experiment outside the traditional confines of schools. We persist in trying to fit new technology into the centuries-old molds for learning that are based on the primacy of location—campus and classroom. Yet my continued optimism for change is based on the belief that we, as educators, will follow our instincts and learn to use instructional technology in the most efficient and effective ways. And if it means abandoning traditional practices, then so be it. For example, a critical outcome of computers and the Internet is the removal of time and space barriers to learning. We are beginning to realize that location is an arbitrary barrier and that education can be far more dynamic when liberated from the walls and gates of schools and allowed to flourish in exciting real-world environments.

The catalyst for change is the human will. It simply won't be denied. The confluence of technology and our natural tendency toward freedom and empowerment will press against and eventually flow around and over the physical boundaries of our schools. Freed from location, what forms will Internet-based education take? How will our roles change? No one can know for sure, but we can guess. Here is my projection.

Freedom

In general, the more choices we have, the greater our sense of freedom. As human beings, we continually strive to free ourselves from the limits imposed by nature, society, and older technology. When new technology is introduced, the old quickly becomes confining and restrictive.

The desire for freedom inspires innovative technology devoted solely to the god of options. It led to the remote control, which allows us to flick through 100-plus channels; to movies on demand; to malls with hundreds of shops, including food courts with a tremendous variety of cuisines; to umpteen models of cars every year; to multibillion dollar after-market industries for customized automobile accessories; and to a host of other high-end products with all the bells and whistles.

Examples abound of technology that exploits our attraction to such products. From our earliest tools of fire and flint knives to automobiles, telephones, television, computers, and the Internet, we have always been drawn to innovations that scream "Freedom!" Fire gives us the power to overcome limits imposed by darkness and extreme climates. Weapons lead to alternatives for foods and natural resources, for ways to relate to or manipulate others. Automobiles bring the freedom to decide when and where we want to go. Telephones give us the option to communicate with anyone anywhere, when we feel like it. Television provides access to live images of events anywhere in the world, at any time of day. And computers—gateways to the Internet and the World Wide Web—allow us to interact instantly with people and information resources anywhere on this planet.

In the workplace, employees are increasingly rubbing up against the confines of set hours. Today, freedom in the form of flexible work schedules is the most desired perk; for example, among accountants, it "beat[s] out

retirement savings plans, health insurance, extra time off and bonuses" (SmartPros 2004). With advances in technologies that free workers to do their jobs from home or other remote sites 24 hours a day, seven days a week, this trend toward greater control over working conditions will undoubtedly grow to include flexible work sites.

The traditional school or college—with its campus, classrooms, and rigid schedule of classes—is a form of technology that has allowed us to efficiently educate large numbers of students of varying ages and with interests in numerous subjects. It is based on the factory model, which places raw materials (students) on conveyor belts (schools) and passes them through assembly lines (classes) in which workers (teachers) add their part (knowledge); when all the pieces are bolted and welded together, we have the finished products (graduates). For its day, it was a grand alternative to the little red schoolhouse. It was called, with reverence and awe, "comprehensive," and that one word resonated with images of "state of the art" and "bells and whistles." This system was, for about a century, all things to all people, a veritable smorgasbord of educational choices.

As long as no other technology is on the scene, this traditional model is tolerable. However, options-rich alternatives will soon enter the picture, offering flexible schedules and virtual learning opportunities that defy time and space constraints. And when that day arrives, the linear, industrial model will become obsolete, giving way to the fuzzy electronic model.

That day is now dawning; we are on the brink of a new era. I predict that, in the foreseeable future, we will look back to the year 2005 and wonder how learning could have ever taken place in the jail cells that passed for classrooms. Schools and colleges in the coming decades will be characterized by a new sense of freedom that will make today's campuses seem like medieval dungeons.

Empowerment

User empowerment is the granting of unprecedented decision-making powers to the primary agents in education—teachers and students, who are most directly affected by the decisions. In today's schools and colleges, empowerment is the exception rather than the rule. Where it is present, however, real change has an opportunity to occur (Sarason 1996, 367).

In Hawaii, the powers-that-be agree that the public school system is broken and obsolete. The problem may be acute in our state, but we are not alone, as this statistic indicates: As of 2002, 53% of all college students nationally were taking remedial classes (Fong and Schneider 2002). Despite calls for change, reform, and reinvention, politicians and administrators consistently prescribe solutions that leave power in administrators' hands. The debate is ultimately over governance. Hawaii's Republican governor advocates many smaller school boards instead of the one large board that is now in place. The Democrat-controlled legislature defends the single board but recommends advisory councils for each school. The chair of the board of education and the superintendent of schools side with the legislators, and all parties agree that principals should be given more resources and the power to manage them.

In the shuffle and din, however, classroom teachers and students are an afterthought, and talk of empowering them is no more than lip service. The missing ingredient is the voice of those who will actually implement and be affected by changes. Voicing her frustration about politicians and administrators, Georgiana Caravalho, a teacher at a Big Island elementary school, says, "They're not in the classroom. They don't know what we go through. Yet they make decisions about education for us" (DePledge 2004).

A recent news report highlighted this marginalization of those who actually perform the work, albeit in a different context. During a speech to troops in Kuwait, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld faced this question from Spc. Thomas Wilson: "Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to up-armor our vehicles?" In response, Rumsfeld uttered his now infamous faux pas, "You go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want or wish to have"

(Associated Press 2004). Taking liberties with the wording, we can derive a semblance of what our leaders are saying to teachers: "You work with what we give you, not the resources you might want or wish to have."

Given this approach, it is no wonder that political attempts at reform over the years have failed. Hawaii continues to pour millions into a broken, obsolete system, and the results are always the same: little or no improvement. The old adage—the more things change, the more they remain the same—will probably hold true until the state realizes that decision-making must be placed in the hands of teachers and students (Sarason 1971).

The Projection

What changes can we expect when freedom and empowerment are part of the picture? What will the future be like when the institutional climate provides teachers and students with technology that maximizes options for Web-based instruction and gives them the power to determine how they will function? I cannot be certain, but as an online teacher at an institution that values empowerment and freedom, I can take an educated guess.

Empowered to redefine the contexts for teaching and learning, the first step most teachers and students will take is to break out of the traditional classroom's confining cells. The new classrooms will have little in common with the old. As free learning environments, they will be defined by function, purpose, and membership rather than temporal, physical, or geographical boundaries. Freedom will mean numerous powerful multimedia options made possible by the widespread use of broadband. Thus class will be an electronic live meeting with audio-video feeds of all participants from individually selected locations. Some will be at home; others will be at the mall; and still others will be traveling abroad. Each participant will be able to see and hear, in real-time, his or classmates on the computer screen. To maximize freedom, these classes will be held asynchronously, allowing instructors and students to participate from both the locations and times of their choosing.

A few traditional schools will remain, but the vast majority will be demolished and the land converted to community recreational and educational centers with free learning facilities. Schools as we know them will be replaced by electronic zones and community complexes that combine shopping, entertainment, dining, and educational facilities. These public-private partnerships will breathe new life into urban areas and turn shopping centers and malls into socially valuable centers for lifelong learning. Furthermore, distinctions between elementary, secondary, and college levels will blur and re-form into a variety of flexible categories based not so much on age as on interest, ability, social needs, and the like.

The University of Hawaii at Manoa is currently planning a campus facility with some of the elements I have envisioned. It will be called M Town, for Manoa Town. According to Creamer (2004, pars. 3-4), the community will include "a new cafe; a 24-hour computer lab and study center; a town square; a park with barbecue grills; an improved general store; a central post office; a sustainable garden and teahouse; and an enlarged fitness center." Also in the plans is a "24-hour 'Borders-style' library with multiple services including wireless computer seating, conversation nooks and food-to-go." In fall 2004 the campus newspaper reported that "the plan has been gradually materializing with the completion and ongoing building of several 'hotspots'" (Ali 2004, par. 2).

Margit Misangyi Watts, the university's interim housing director, says, "We can't bring the town to us, so we've got to create the town" (Creamer 2004, par. 1). Although the university's plan does expand current models of classroom-based learning, I doubt that even a full realization of the M Town project would be able to compete with the electronic zones and community complexes that I anticipate.

I foresee that in these new learning environments, the teachers of tomorrow will be empowered to redefine and expand their roles to include many different functions. The traditional teacher's role will survive, but most likely in a greatly diminished capacity. Replacing the generalists will be specialists, or learning advisors and

subject-area experts. The advisors will be skilled in working with students and motivating them to discover the learning styles and goals that are best suited to their interests. They will coordinate the students' academic careers at the institution, assisting in the development of a matriculation plan for each client and in class scheduling every term. In keeping with the current emphasis on individual advising as a key to academic success (National Academic Advising Association 2005), the reputation and ultimate success of institutions at all levels will be based largely on the learning advisors' effectiveness.

Such changes in the role of the teacher will be fostered by a much more flexible and sophisticated approach to current technologies of learning. The subject-area experts will be skilled in presenting information in dynamic and interactive ways via the Web. Most will be in-house (i.e., they will be on the college staff), whereas others will be independent or working out of publishing houses. The traditional college textbook in this scenario will be replaced by broadband, multimedia sources. Authors unable to make the transition to these dynamic media will not thrive. Subject-area experts with hundreds or thousands of clients will hire or be assigned with other experts, who will work with smaller groups of clients. The experts who fail to coordinate their efforts with learning advisors and who rarely interact with students will quickly lose their clients to more responsive competitors. In successful partnerships, students will be able to carry on a running dialogue with the various Web authors and their staffs. Saavy experts will incorporate these dialogues into their sites as an integral part of their service.

I believe that through these developments, education will eventually become the world's largest enterprise. Just as many traditional roles will be expanded or altered, many new positions will be created. For example, the learning advisors described above will work closely not only with counselors, but also with paraprofessional monitors who are trained to help students online and face-to-face, individually and in groups; some monitors will operate out of electronic zones and complexes. Subject-area experts and learning advisors will coordinate their efforts with private- and public-sector professionals as well as legions of student tutors. The professionals, who actually work in the field, will provide collaborative, on-the-job, or shadowing opportunities for students. The tutors will be students who have attained higher degrees of mastery in their subject areas. Plans for M Town, mentioned earlier, include student tutors: "'If you have 3,000 students contributing their expertise, think how rich and vibrant M Town can be," says Watts. Assuming that each student contributed 10 hours per semester to community enrichment, the result would be 30,000 hours of peer instruction and assistance (Creamer 2004, pars. 12-14).

Empowered to redefine their roles as learners, students in the future will finally be able to break out of the passive molds cultivated by traditional schools and play a much greater role in their own education. Under the guidance of learning advisors, subject-area experts, and paraprofessional monitors, they will be able to explore and experience dynamic electronic and real-world learning activities. Their curriculum, based on individual academic plans, will take into account their interests, learning style, goals, abilities, and needs. Perhaps the most exciting feature of free learning environments is the nearly limitless opportunities for face-to-face social and scholastic meetings. Rather than limiting human contact, these environments in the form of electronic zones and community complexes will facilitate and encourage them.

Cost, of course, will be a factor in all of these projected developments. But we can help offset the price tag for this revolution by redirecting the huge sums that were previously spent on building and maintaining the physical plants that we call schools, and by collaborating with the private sector to provide educational facilities. Theoretically, an entire college could be reduced to an administration office and a computer room. All business and communication with students and faculty could be managed electronically or via mail. A large portion of the costs associated with support staff, classrooms, labs, libraries, parking lots, cafeterias, auxiliary services, maintenance, faculty offices, and the like would be eliminated. Multipurpose meeting rooms in the community could be shared among educational institutions, and the costs for renting and maintaining them could be shared by the state, city, and nearby businesses. The point is that in this scenario, education becomes a community rather than a school effort, one that is relevant to all members of the population—not just K-12 and college students. We also begin to think of learning as an anywhere, anytime activity and a lifelong experience.

Conclusion

When we, as educators, want to see what the future holds for schools and colleges, we automatically turn inward toward the concrete and grass that make up our campuses. We try to imagine what the buildings and grounds will look like, how the classrooms will be equipped, what types of resources will be available, and what roles the current staff will play. When we introduce new technology, we force them into the existing configurations. When the face-to-face class was the only viable technology available, this in-the-box approach made sense. The fact that this process is increasingly producing little if any real change, however, should tell us that something is amiss. One of the signals that we should hear, loud and clear, is that the world is changing very rapidly, and yet we are still bogged down in a tired, broken system that is becoming increasingly alienated from the rest of the world.

While we have been preoccupied with our own doings, the world around us has moved on. With the advent of smaller and more powerful computers at lower and lower prices; with cell phones that are beginning to rival the most sophisticated handheld computers; with the rapid rise of and increasing access to the Internet, the Web, and wireless connections; and with the growing availability and use of broadband in the world, the traditional classroom and campus are quickly becoming hopelessly outdated by their own restrictive approaches and top-down mentality.

Looking back to the mid-1990s, when the World Wide Web first became accessible to the world at large, I can see that, despite all the dire predictions, isolated flights of online instruction were allowed to take off on unsteady, patched-together wings. The lone, shaky aircrafts did not crash and burn, and they stayed in the air long enough to convince nervous administrators that flight was indeed possible. Gradually, a few more classes were added, accompanied by a crescendo of doom and gloom warnings. But the sky did not fall, and the frightened voices are being drowned by the air traffic. In fact, once airborne, teachers and students quickly discovered the element that they had been missing all along in this whole business of education: freedom.

The next step is there for the taking. At Kapi'olani Community College, I have had the good fortune to work in a learning environment in which teachers and students have the power to use the latest technology to change the ways in which they interact with one another and with sources of information. Without full technical and administrative support, this empowerment alone would not have taken us very far. Fortunately, the support has always been there when we needed it. While we as teachers and students can realize positive change, we will need the additional help of support staff and outside powers such as the legislature and community to take the next step away from the limitations of the campus and into the world of possibilities.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to conclude this essay is to quote Sarason (1996, 338), who has taken a long hard look at change and decided that no institution is an island: "No complicated, traditional social institution can be changed only from within. There has to be some support for change from within, but there also has to be strong external, powerful pressures for change, powerful in terms of numbers, influence, and legislative legal policymaking responsibilities. Absent those external pressures, the institution will continue the adage I stated repetitively in the book: the more things change, the more they remain the same."

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