

Video is the New Text

The recent surge in over-the-top video has generated diverse new entertainment services. But if video is the new text for a generation of social media, is it finally becoming a compelling teaching tool, asks Howard Greenfield.

Television's power to communicate goes beyond sports, movies, and sitcoms. Technology enablers have paved a way to better education models: multi-screen delivery, pervasive broadband access and ever-improving video compression are just a start. Smart phones, YouTube channels, and the Web itself have created a culture of Googlers and clickers that innately get interactive video. With the iPad, Android tablets, and on-line curricula platforms proliferating, that audience easily distinguishes good teaching materials when it sees them.

US President Obama called this year for "educational technology that will help create digital tutors . . . as effective as personal tutors . . . as compelling as the best video game".

But where is the killer educational-TV app? Where is the academic or industry champion that can close the gap between advanced technology and a Byzantine, de-centralised school purchasing and curriculum system?

One big recent development in Higher Education is edX. Launched this May by MIT and Harvard, the two schools have invested around \$60m in a shared venture to put university classes online, making them freely available to anyone on the planet. "Our goal is to educate a billion people around the world," says edX president Anant Agarwal. edX's first course, Circuits and Electronics, attracted a stunning 120,000 registrations worldwide - about the same number as the entire living MIT alumnae.

MIT and Harvard are not the only interactive video upstarts. Stanford and Princeton also announced a \$16m investment in May 2012 in start-up Coursera. And last fall, another Stanford professor, Sebastian Thrun, garnered over 160,000 student registrations for

his Artificial Intelligence course. Thrun is now offering a number of courses through his new company, Udacity.

At the heart of these e-classes is video. Video lessons are combined with quiz components and interactive feedback delivered at a pace the student sets.

In Silicon Valley, digital meet-ups convene almost every day of the week at sites such as Google, Microsoft, Skype and Adobe headquarters. From Android apps to DASH, from OTT to new video service start-ups, there is no shortage of technology sessions and tech entrepreneurs touting the latest breakthrough.

I recently attended a local panel on video games in education sponsored by the Luxembourg for Business trade association, a country which has already become the European base for media companies Netflix, Amazon, and Skype. At this Churchill Club event, pundits from the schools, industry, and research discussed the progress in applying video games to schools.

In the past, video classes have been about "pointing cameras at teachers" says Charlie Jablonski, currently VP of operations for cloud video gaming platform OnLive. I ran into Charlie at the Luxembourg event after he had just completed a seminar on technology and gaming enabling education. His voice on these matters comes through having served as NBC's head of engineering in a 16-year tenure there, and as former president of SMPTE. In a follow-up conversation, Charlie went on to tell me that "today, if you give twelve kids in the class the video tools, there's a better chance that they can figure it out than parachuting someone in. It's about interaction with teachers, the Socratic method - this enables learning. Otherwise, you could just film every professor and put them on the shelf."

For the past twelve centuries, it's been a battle to get past the gatekeepers, believes Jablonski. "It's not a new battle. But in my several decades of perspective, I feel better about technology making a positive impact in education now more than I have in all my career."

The Holy Grail of technology has long been to serve the world through education, though redeeming offerings have been few and far between. Video is becoming more ubiquitous, but turning video apps into meaningful educational outcomes is not automatic. It's going to take a visionary individual or start-up to transform plodding educational administrations.

But for some educational experts, there is hope. "Online education is here to stay, and it's only going to get better," says Lawrence S Bacow, former Tufts president and Harvard Corporation member.

Years ago, when I was a researcher in the Apple Classroom of Tomorrow in its Advanced Technology Group, Apple seeded the schools with the Macintosh bundled with multimedia software. It was commercial practice, but it carried a sense of educational mission. Today, until there is a creative industry catalyst to support such innovation and change at scale, progress may be steady, but it will be slow. Maybe some of the resources generated from the companies with educational roots such as Facebook, with a near \$100 billion valuation, and Apple, with \$100 billion in the bank, will respond to the recent rallying cry to this worthy calling.



Howard Greenfield

is president of Go Associates, a global consulting firm helping companies bring technology to market, and co-author of *IPTV & Internet Video, Second Edition* (Focal Press/NAB, 2009). He may be reached at howard@go-associates.com.

