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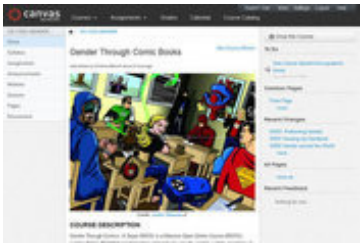
News

Beware Batch Processing Of Kids: Ed Tech Expert

Online learning should not supplant kids coming together to participate in teams, says researcher Justin Reich.

It's hard not to get hepped up about education technology. The combination of perceived need for an immense rethink of public education and our belief in the huge potential of technology seem made for each other. But there's a dark side to the hype, warned Justin Reich, co-founder of EdTechTeacher and a Berkman Center Fellow conducting research on the field.



8 MOOCs Transforming Education

(click image for larger view and for slideshow)

Reich raised a fundamental question in his talk this week at Harvard Law School, "Personalized Learning, Backpacks Full of Cash, Rockstar Teachers and MOOC Madness." That question: what's technology bringing to education that's new? The answer is not "nothing." But, he says, it's unclear what new approaches and technology will work. He half-joked that half of the ideas out there will fail. And he worries about the long-term impact on our society.

"I'm pretty certain some of these ideas and technologies have tremendous potential to expand human achievement, learning and development," Reich said. "I'm also absolutely certain that a lot of things are taking some very old, and in some cases some very tired, ideas in education and putting them in shiny new form factors."

[How are top education IT pros dealing with online competition? Read MOOCs: What University CIOs Really Think.]

He said everyone interested in using technology to reform education must keep three ideas in mind:

-- Students learn as much from the structure of the educational system as from what they are taught;

-- Technology can take old ideas and jazz them up, but they are still old ideas;

-- We do not know the long-term impact of the decisions we make now.

Reich cited Nearpod as an example of a technology approach that looks new but he says is not. Nearpod is an iPad app that makes it easier for teachers to create interactive presentations. He pointed out that in essence, it is just a variation on the chalkboard, a way to force students to look at notes about a subject. He also said that the emergence of "rock star" teachers such as Coursera's Sebastian Thrun and Khan Academy's Salman Khan means little in innovation and does not personalize the process. He noted that they don't actually interact individually with the throngs who look at their classes, so they clearly aren't individualizing instruction.

He praised Khan Academy for its lectures, but said that the idea of using it to supplement classroom instruction, called blended learning, or even to use Khan Academy to replace math teachers, or "unbundle" that part of education, hearkens back to Edward Thorndike, who helped popularize the idea that modern public education was something of an assembly line. In this model, online courses like Khan's simply let each student run the assembly line at their own pace.

Reich said we might soon see educational assessment companies putting 360-degree cameras in classrooms and sending their video feeds off to low-level grunts who will spend their days grading teachers on their work. That idea should set efficiency pioneer Frederick Winslow Taylor to quivering appreciatively in his grave. Reich himself is not as excited; he raised the question of whether you want your kids' teachers assessed by people in cubicle farms.

Meanwhile, Reich said, ideas pushing more customized, personal learning, such as the connected classroom touted by the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation, hearken back to John Dewey, whose ideas for the most part lost out to Thorndike's.

Reich is not a technophobe. But he says he's deeply concerned about how online learning will change society. He says the pay-for-play model that online learning represents could change the nature of American polity.

Public education exists in part to educate young citizens, he noted. Online learning "positions them as consumers, and hopes that market will efficiently distribute these resources," Reich said.

He warns that this is a fundamental shift in education. Schools of almost every stripe have been places where students shared experiences, and developed and deviated from social norms. In such a system, he argues, children are involved in collaboratively authoring their learning experiences.

What happens to that experience, and that way of being in society, when a large enough number of students no longer participate in it? Reich said it absolutely seems right to let a smart child in a rural school district take an AP math class online, and skip out on the school's classroom experience. But "if 10% or 15% of kids opt out, team and interdisciplinary activities no longer make sense," he said.

In the existing mode, kids are learners and have reciprocal obligations to one another. In the consumer mode that seems to be emerging, kids will optimize their individual opportunities. Reich said teaching history showed him that "when students have choices they don't always pick in ways that would be most valuable to them." For instance, most kids will not opt to learn about things like the Holocaust or the Civil Rights movement, but they need to learn about them, and they should learn about them in a group. "We should make students study these things and should make them study together," he said.

In the end, he said, education technology is not just about gaining relief from "batch processing" students. "There are all kinds of things we lose when we stop treating students as communities of learners and treat them as individuals. We should not let those changes happen without a serious discussion of the consequences."

Of course, he's told us we can't know the consequences. Reich is suggesting that the changes we're gearing up to make to education will be good for the individual and bad for society. The question, then, is are we turning our education system into our financial system?

What do you think?