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Lessons Learned from Chinese Education Startups

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Connie Chan and Frank Chen • A16Z © 2019

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Take-Aways

- Current education models must change to keep up with a dynamic job market that demands lifelong learning.
- Learning apps in the West don't take advantage of many benefits that mobile technology offers. They should look to China for inspiration.
- Mobile learning should feature a mixed-media approach, including video, podcasts, PDFs, live streams between students and teachers, one-on-one consults, and more.
- Ad-based compensation for video teaching encourages clickbait and limits content depth. Alternative compensation plans would be an incentive for quality.
- In China, 150 million users pay \$40 billion for mobile-based learning programs, and forecasts suggest those numbers will grow.

Recommendation

The Western model for education doesn't do much to encourage life-long learning. The state pays for general schooling up to grade 12, then you can borrow money for further education, which is supposed to set you up for a life-long career. Things are different in China, where adults prioritize – and will pay for – extra education. The cultural demand for lifelong learning has led to sophisticated mobile learning platforms. Consumer tech expert Connie Chan and AI aficionado Frank Chen are partners at Andreessen Horowitz and well-positioned to discuss the future of learning in this A16Z podcast.

Summary

The US education model begins with kindergarten and ends with college. Perhaps people receive some on-the-job training, but for the most part, their years of formal learning end roughly at the age of 22. The current job market requires people to continue learning throughout their careers, and online programs like Udacity and MasterClass are rushing to fill that gap. Still, there are barriers – cultural, technological and incentive-based – to the kind of lifelong learning that will be required in the future.

“The world is so dynamic now that you can't learn everything that you need to be a productive worker or citizen by age 22, and you're going to have to learn ongoing.”

China's advanced mobile-centric, AI-enhanced learning platforms lead the way. Language apps for Western learners often take a “flashcard approach,” ignoring the phone's built-in microphones that offer an opportunity for learners to practice speaking rather than just listening and reading. Chinese-language learning apps use machine learning to rate learners' performance, giving them real-time feedback on pronunciation. The same tools are used to help people learn to play musical instruments. App-based lessons come with the added benefit of allowing the student to choose how long to engage: They might only have time for a “bite-sized” five-minute lesson every morning or a quick audio lecture while commuting home.

“There's a lot that we can do with machine learning, especially when it comes to language and music, that is still...very untapped in the West.”

Current US-based learning platforms are also overly focused on video content when students might be better served with a mix of media: podcasts, blog posts, pdfs, live-streamed question-and-answer sessions, and one-on-one consultations with teachers. Teachers who use YouTube are at the mercy of an ad-based compensation program that encourages clickbait rather than deep information. The best teachers are rarely media or technology experts, but because people tend to click on videos with high production values, creators get hung up on high-quality equipment and video editing. Many are underpaid for the value they provide. Moving away from ad-based compensation and toward a tuition or subscription program might help the best teachers rise to the top.

“If you're building for the future, consider building your platform mobile-first...It'll help you unlock insights someone building for a PC would never get to.”

Improved learning platforms will require a cultural shift from Western users as well. In China, education is perhaps the third- or fourth-biggest expense after housing and medical care. Paying for education is a cultural norm. In China, 150 million users spend \$40 billion on mobile-learning apps, and data reveal that most of these users are between the ages of 26 and 35. Classes aren't limited to language and music. They can extend to parenting, hobbies, professional and personal development, and other topics that everyone needs but rarely see covered in college classes.

About the Podcast

The **A16Z** podcast discusses tech and culture trends, featuring industry experts, business leaders, and other interesting thinkers from around the world. **Frank Chen** and **Connie Chan** are both partners at Andreessen Horowitz.



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