

Could education create the next Facebook?



By [Dr Marko Saravanja](#)

15 Jul 2013

Can free education be the foundation upon which the next Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn is created? I believe so, but it will require total dedication to open access.

In many ways, education is equally essential to successful human development as our most basic needs. The significant distinction between the likes of food, water, shelter and safety, however, is that the pursuit of knowledge is often accompanied by great cost.

Despite the critical mental, emotional and indeed spiritual significance of learning, which lies in understanding your purpose, a formal education is still beyond the reach of billions. In many impoverished regions, residents are more likely to enjoy access to basic infrastructure and telecommunication networks than books or classrooms.

In South Africa, only 41.7% of the total population has completed an education of high school or above. Critically, the average time spent schooling adults is only 6.1 years. Although these statistics paint a picture of an education system in crisis, public spending on learning is roughly 17.8% of total government spending.

Limpopo textbook scandal

One year ago the province of Limpopo was rocked by a scandal in which 500 000 of the 1.3 million text books for local Grades 1, 2, 3 and 10 students had failed to arrive by September 2012 - nine months after the beginning of the school term.

To overcome challenges such as these, educators must begin to reimagine the possibilities associated with the transfer of critical skills and understanding. Are bricks and mortar institutions, physical textbooks and contact learning really the most fitting enablers of widespread education?

Each year, prospective South African tertiary students assemble outside the gates of well-known institutions to jostle for the final remaining positions in key fields of study, such as engineering or business.

Limited capacity often results in disaster, especially considering that more people are hungry for education. An example was the one woman who was killed and 17 injured during a stampede whilst trying to enter a university to enrol. Indeed, even the students afforded a position are not guaranteed valuable one-on-one time with lecturers. Understaffed and over-capacity institutions often find true contact learning difficult to achieve.

A "Freemium" approach

The adoption of a "Freemium" approach to learning may be one solution to this. Improved access to technology and the emergence of universal connectivity has made it entirely possible for millions to enrich themselves with knowledge gained via an open source online portal. In fact, education deployment models of this nature may begin to surpass traditional institutions of learning in years to come.

Today, an increasing number of primary and tertiary education platforms are beginning to investigate the exciting potential of free learning. By affording prospective students access to comprehensive coursework, tests and supporting materials at cost these institutions are hoping to attract a broader audience - not just a privileged few.

The benefits are numerous. Any online portal with millions of active subscribers has the capacity effectively to monetise this audience to the mutual benefit of both the learners and the institution. Furthermore, open access to coursework will also encourage a greater number of learners ultimately to seek formal qualifications - a paid service should they choose to proceed.

Indeed, with free course material at hand, students would certainly find examination preparation more fluid. Without dependence on face-to-face lecturers or tutors, these individuals could learn at their own pace, critically reducing learner dropout rates in tertiary courses.

For these reasons it is highly possible that free learning may just be the foundation upon which the next major social network is constructed. Giving individuals a platform to discuss and share topics of interest freely, relevant coursework and related materials could very well hasten the emergence of a very different kind of Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter altogether.

Such a network would do more than simply socialise and connect people with common interests. Instead, an education-based online platform could add meaningful value on a global scale by affording anyone admission to the world of knowledge.

Success in this regard will require total dedication to open-access learning. Although several widely recognised institutions currently permit prospective students access to MOOCs - or Massive Open Online Courses, these offerings include only a small portion of the total coursework. Functioning more as marketing ploys than true enablers of learning, MOOCs often do more to frustrate learners than to enrich their minds.

We strongly believe that access to knowledge will soon become as simple and easy as subscribing to an online platform. We have the tools, now we must learn to use them.

ABOUT DR MARKO SARAVANJA

Dr Marko Saravanja is chairperson at Regenesys Business School. He has over 15 years of experience in management and leadership development, education and training. Between 1996 - 1998, Marko worked at Wits University as a programme manager and lecturer. In 1999, he started Regenesys together with Penny Law. He was the CEO of Regenesys up until 2009. Since then he has been Chairperson of the Board of Directors.
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