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Tech Talk Review

This review focuses on a TED talk delivered by Salman Khan at TED 2011 in Edinburgh, Scotland in which he discusses how and why he founded the venerable Khan Academy, a carefully structured series of educational videos offering complete curricula in math and, now, other subjects. The title of the talk was reasonably “Let's use video to reinvent education”. As is the traditional structure of a TED talk audience participation is limited to clapping and laughing but of course the content of a TED talk is usually engaging enough for audience members to benefit through listening.

The talk begins with a brief description of who Salmon is and what the Khan academy does. From his initial work with his own cousins in tutoring them and creating several youtube videos demonstrating math principles to the creation and curriculum of the Khan academy that now represents over 2,200 video lectures and millions of students engaged every month with hundreds of thousands of video views each day. He discusses his realization that his cousins could through the use of his videos self pace, recover, and engage with educational material without emotional encumberments. He goes on to describe the video's growth in popularity and its impact and interaction with the internet community. Growing beyond his initial feelings of warmth at the impact his lessons were having he realizes that this content will not grow old, that is will continue to have this impact. Salmon describes interactions that he

begins to have with teachers who have taken to using his videos as homework and and what was traditionally the homework had now moved into the classroom where it was and interaction between students and teachers. These “flipped” classrooms offer teachers the ability to work with students who are stuck on a concept while students with proficient understanding move on. It is this idea of a flipped classroom that is the crux of Salmon’s talk; his righteous belief that he has done good and everybody should do so too.

Is he right? Possibly. I myself have already tried much of this. I teach a course in three dimensional modeling and animation. A rather complex topic that requires the transmission of a lot of information about the structure and function of the program used to achieve this, and I have created a lot of tutorial videos to supplement what is happening in class. All of the principles that Salmon outlined about the usefulness of video education hold true. Students can learn at their own pace, they may recover information without the embarrassment of asking the teacher to explain it again (which is a valid concern that holds back far too many students). I have no limitations to my implementing this in my own classroom and have with great success, nor do i feel that the tools necessary to do this are lacking for any teacher. Some districts may lack the technology but that seems like a negligible amount at this time.

The limitations to the implementation of this this kind of flipped classroom is not a technological one in this reviewers opinion. Having done this sort of education myself I find that video has its own limitations. For example if a student just needs to recover one piece of material in a ten minute demonstration they must watch the entire video or ineffectively scrub back and forth throughout the timeline searching for that information with very few context clues. There is no ability to scan for information like

one can with a book. Yes by god, I am suggesting the the most efficient form of transmitting documented educational instruction remains the book. I have started to transition over from a large catalogue of video tutorials to a wiki that while including videos also includes text and image based instruction allowing students to search for information more efficiently.

To my mind Salmon Khan has some wonderful intentions and is providing valuable resources to learners across the globe but some of his assumptions about the effectiveness of flipped classrooms are flawed. It is not the technology that makes this work but his own innate abilities as a fantastic teacher. It is wonderful to use technology in teaching, but it does not replace good teachers.