

# Hyper Hype

*Will digital learning be killed by kindness?*

## **Getting Smart: How Digital Learning Is Changing the World**

by Tom Vander Ark

*John Wiley & Sons, 2012, \$26.95;  
213 pages.*

### *As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein*

“The revolution is on,” Tom Vander Ark declares in this review of digital learning circa 2011. With long experience in education, including time as a superintendent in Washington State, officer with the Gates Foundation, and CEO of Open Education Solutions, not to mention an endorsement from the former governor of West Virginia, Bob Wise, Vander Ark outlines the current moment as a welcome and overdue threshold in primary and secondary education. On one page alone he repeats, “The learning revolution underway is the shift from print to digital...,” “The revolution will yield powerful learning platforms...,” “The revolution will yield a new generation of schools...,” and “The learning revolution is underway but progress will be lumpy...”

As the subtitle indicates, we stand at a critical moment, and there is good reason for optimism, given the ways in which digital technology can customize learning and dismantle the old calendars and spaces of schooling. Extraordinary innovations have arrived—online curricula, learning games, customized playlists—and they are ready for implementation across the land if only educators and public officials break with standard procedure and embrace them. It’s time to “get smart,” and hence this 10-chapter exhortation on the efficacious future. Every few pages Vander Ark adds a bold prediction sidebar: “*In five years...*Information from keystroke data will unlock the new field of

motivation research...,” “*In five years...* Most learning platforms will feature a smart recommendation engine, similar to iTunes Genius...,” and “*In five years...*Science will confirm the obvious about how most boys learn and active learning models will be developed in response using expeditions, playlists, and projects.”

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He accumulates rousing examples of individuals and institutions in breakthrough practice:

- students tapping into iTunes U, compiling e-portfolios, and editing web sites
- peer-to-peer learning sites and learning games such as Mangahigh
- online organizations such as K12 and School of One that replace wasteful “seat-in-class” time with customized learning time
- social networking that “will augment and then replace the classroom as the dominant organizing unit”

Experts, too, assert the radical advances of digital tools, such as Tom Chatfield, author of *Fun Inc.: Why Gaming Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century*, who says of games, “I’m in awe at their power to motivate, to compel us, to transfix us, like really nothing else we’ve ever invented has quite done before.” Vander Ark encapsulates the advent in a simple formula: “It changes everything when anyone can learn anything almost anywhere.”

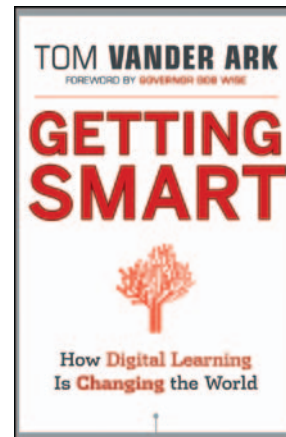
As the effusions pile up, however, one wonders about how much the enthusiasm obscures some circumstances that complicate Vander Ark’s bold and sanguine vision. After all, broad, well-funded digital initiatives such as Maine’s statewide laptop program for middle schoolers have been around for a decade, and yet their academic impact has proven disappointing again and again. And Vander Ark affirms that social media “can help build a common culture and help make sense of a confusing world—and increasingly so for school communities,” but all he says about the dark side of social networking among teens—including excess peer pressure and gossip, sexting and bullying, cheating—is, “Some of their reasons for connecting will not be as noble as we’d like, so we’ll need to stay on top of this.”

These conditions don’t change the overall potential of digital learning, but more acknowledgment of them sustains a more sober, less partisan advocacy. Without it, Vander Ark slips too often into dramatic predictions and platitudes. He announces, “If we can help enough people get smart, I believe we can confront the challenge of climate change, public health, peace, and security,” as if smart people never pollute the earth or start wars. After

glimpses of three bright kids learning online in creative ways, Vander Ark writes, “These portraits represent how millions of students could be learning with tools that are currently available to schools,” as if the cases of three prove millions more. And the trick of motivating kids, he says, has been found: “Any thirteen-year-old could tell you the answer. It’s game designers”—a too pat and blunt answer.

All this hype and prophecy is unnecessary. The digital future is here, and its main educational advantage, the individualization of learning, is recognized by everyone. At this point, the pressing questions are practical:

how much it costs, how to overcome bureaucracy, for example. Vander Ark does include an appendix of concrete advice, such as urging state leaders to allow students to personalize their learning and base matriculation on demonstrated competency, not on seat time, but these are precisely the points to expound in the main text, not stick in an appendix. We don’t need any more puffy announcements of youth liberation, such as “This greater self-awareness and freedom brings with



it new responsibilities and opportunities for students to better advocate for themselves.” And overdone assertions, such as “games have the motivational power to help us change the world,” don’t mean anything to public officials. What we need

is sound evidence, presented without hyperbole, of scalable and cost-effective digital programs that yield higher reading, writing, and math achievement.

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