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Game Changer

Might it be "social learning"?

By MICHAEL B. HORN

In the past, preparing for the SAT meant reading through a test-prep book, hiring a private tutor, or attending test-prep classes. Grockit, an education start-up, is trying to change all that by taking test prep—and studying in general—online to make it convenient and affordable, more effective, and more engaging and social.

Students sign up through Facebook or Grockit's web site. Some dive into solo mode, working through questions and receiving relevant tips from tutor-recorded videos on "Grockit TV." But most enter group mode, studying with friends on Facebook or in virtual study groups that Grockit sets up.

Throughout the experience, students receive real-time feedback on how they are doing, the chance to review old concepts, and score predictions that show their improvement based on their learning progressions.

At the third annual Education Innovation Summit at Arizona State University (ASU), the 800 attendees—among them leading education entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, private-equity funders, foundation officers, policymakers, and others—were abuzz, or perhaps "atwitter," about this hot and emerging space called social learning into which Grockit, among others, has blazed a trail over the last few years.

Conversations at the event and across the broader education sector reveal a mixture of excitement and nervousness as to whether the purveyors of tech-enabled social-learning experiences will develop sustainable business models and whether the experiences they create will bolster student learning or be just another education fad.

Either way, social learning is sweeping through education circles. To be fair though, despite Facebook's recent stumble into public ownership, if you place the word "social" in front of nearly anything these days, you can get a meeting in Silicon Valley. It's not just educators who are excited about the possibilities.

Social learning, if understood as people gleaning information from one another, has of course been alive and well for as long as humanity itself. As Farb Nivi, founder of Grockit, said at the ASU event, it was the dominant way learning occurred before the industrialization of education in the mid-to-late 1800s. Social learning as a distinct sector in the world of education technology is a more recent phenomenon. Here, technology brings teachers and learners together in a vast network to create and share information online.

Building off the craze around social media—and social networking giant Facebook's success in generating high user engagement—education entrepreneurs are increasingly weaving social components into their online learning innovations. For educators, the enticement is the opportunity to increase student engagement and enable students to learn from other students, teachers from other teachers, and students from teachers around the world. Of course, just as many people worry about the accuracy of articles on Wikipedia, there are concerns about the quality of the information students might receive from their peers. But the goal is clear: for every online learner to have access to personalized, tutorial-like experiences on demand.

How these trends will develop is anyone's guess, but the reigning vision of online learning as a solitary experience will likely be quickly replaced. Social is hot, and just as it has radically altered how we operate in our personal lives, it will transform how we learn as well.

Grockit arrived on the scene toward the end of 2007 and is now expanding from test prep into K–12 and higher education. As it does so, it is bringing in motivational elements from other fields. For example, students earn badges—a staple in the "gaming" world—as they make progress in Grockit.

The company's solution is built around its central belief that group study is the most effective way for students to learn. Some outside research hints that group study can be fruitful. Richard Light, professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has reported that students' ability to form and participate in small study groups influences their success in college more than multiple other factors, although many of us also know that study groups are not always helpful, and the research remains anything but conclusive.

Grockit reports that students engaged in its social learning experience study longer, answer more questions, and

get more questions correct. The company employs several researchers who conduct studies on everything from learning outcomes to time spent on task.

When in 2010 Facebook unveiled its "Open Graph," Grockit was one of two education companies among the 60 initial partners. Open Graph extends the "social graph" (individual members and their connections) to include among members' visible Facebook activities the various interests they pursue online via third-party applications (reading articles, listening to music, and recipe browsing, for example), and allows students to study with their friends and to show off their learning progress.

Obstacles remain, however. Many schools bar their students from using Facebook in school, and some bar teachers from communicating with students through the social networking site.

Enter Edmodo. Founded in 2008 by two technologists working at schools in Chicago, the company aims to help educators harness the power of social media to customize the classroom for every learner. Edmodo provides teachers and students with a secure place to connect and collaborate, share content and educational applications, and access homework, grades, class discussions, and notifications.

Edmodo looks a lot like Facebook, complete with third-party applications. And it has grown virally like Facebook, too, at least by education standards; more than 8 million teachers and students around the world use the platform. It doesn't hurt that it is free to use—just like Facebook. Teachers have flocked to it to engage students, connect with their peers, share and store content, track and measure success, and access online professional development.

Open questions include whether Edmodo changes the instructional paradigm in a meaningful way. With its focus on the teacher, Edmodo to some extent reinforces the traditional one-teacher-to-many-students classroom structure. What is promising, however, is that Edmodo appears "disruptive" relative to many other learning management systems: initially it was limited in its ability to help a teacher organize a full course, but because it is free and cloud-based, and therefore more convenient and simpler to use than most such systems, it gained rapid adoption and continues to improve. All this suggests that Edmodo could play a role in a student-centric digital learning ecosystem. Whether the company will be able to find enough consistent revenue sources to stay viable remains to be seen.

Another company to offer social learning opportunities free of charge is Sophia Learning, which was founded in 2009 and incubated out of—and recently acquired by—Capella University, one of the nation's online universities. Sophia is a social teaching and learning network. In the company's words, "It's where you can teach what you know and learn what you don't."

Sophia Learning looks far more like the Khan Academy than Facebook, as it provides thousands of academic tutorials for students. The critical difference is that these tutorials are taught in a variety of ways by a variety of people, and the site offers math, English, science, and more.

These are far from the only players. Among competitors in the K–12 market are Schoology, a learning management system and social network that makes it easy to create and share academic content and recently hit 1 million users; ePals, a social network optimized for K–12 learning with more than half a million classrooms in 200 countries and territories signed up; Remix Learning, a customizable social-learning network for primary and secondary education that employs a subscription model for schools, nonprofit organizations, museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions; and Sokikom, which provides a social learning environment for web-based math games for primary-school students. A slew of other companies are engaged in helping students and teachers from around the world collaborate.

Will greater engagement, personalized learning, and peer collaboration give a much-needed boost to student achievement? That's the hope among educators—and the challenge to social learning entrepreneurs.

Michael Horn is executive director of the education practice of Innosight Institute and executive editor at Education Next.
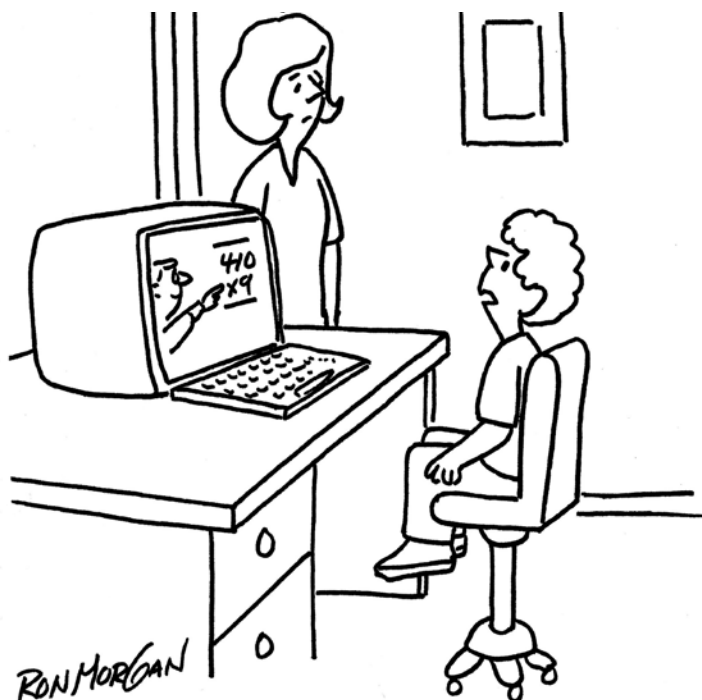
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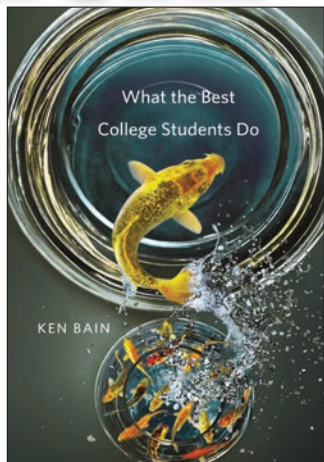# Harvard
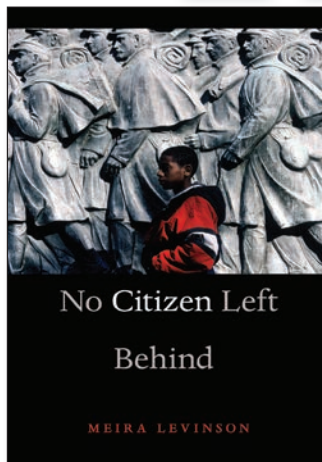
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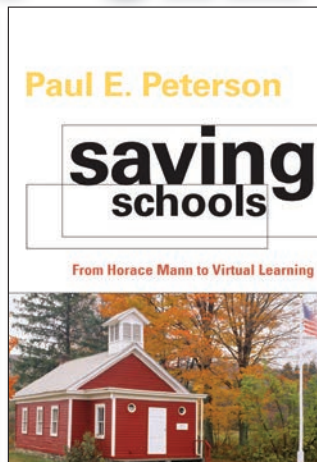
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