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Chapter 4

How Are You Going to Keep Them in the Classroom After They've Seen MTV? Online Education in a Virtual World

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a vital activity in our society. It involves many things, including (1) the transfer of knowledge from experienced to less experienced individuals; (2) the creation and storage of information for a wide range of individuals known and unknown to the creator of knowledge; (3) social engineering to create skills for people to play productive roles in the future; (4) opportunities to change one's major life activities and financial prospects; and (5) the prospect of the fun of discovery (and/or the sweat of drilled memorization).

An educated citizenry has always been essential for any society, but for much of history the necessary knowledge was largely acquired through experience and self study. The "book learning" provided by prestigious universities was primarily designed for the elites (and almost exclusively for

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males). Abraham Lincoln, a highly educated man and one of the greatest of U. S. presidents, was largely self-taught; he had less than a year of formal schooling (Donald, 1995). A century ago, in even the most advanced industrial countries, most jobs required long hours, vigorous physical labor, and minimal formal education. In industrialized countries, the routine jobs in both agriculture and manufacturing have been mechanized, and workers in those occupations comprise a very small segment of the total work force. Service jobs predominate, some of which are routine and require little schooling, but the fastest growing and most lucrative categories are the so-called "knowledge workers".

Today, largely from the impact of technology, the nature of work is much different. In the latest employment projections of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the five fastest growing U.S. occupations between 1998 and 2008 are predicted to be computer engineers, computer support specialists, systems analysts, database administrators, and desktop publishing specialists. All of these, and most of the next fastest growing occupations, usually require at least a bachelor's degree for an entry level position, and increasingly a master's degree is preferred by employers.

Organizational success in the 21st Century will surely require an emphasis on lifelong learning. Throughout the world there is an increasing mismatch between the level of education being attained by the majority of the population and the needs of employers. Most of the available jobs, especially the jobs that provide a living wage and prospects for advancement, require knowledge and skills that the majority of people have not attained. The degree of skill needed for low-level jobs is increasing, and high-skill employees require continuous retraining (Chute, Thompson, and Hancock, 1999). For all job openings projected to 2008, more than 30% will require some type of post-secondary training (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000).

This is a severe problem in the United States as well as most other industrialized countries. The lack of education is even more critical for the developing countries of the world, that desperately need educated managers and workers to lead the countries out of poverty. In any country, rich or poor, education is increasingly a continuous process. The pool of necessary knowledge is constantly growing, skills quickly become obsolete as technologies change and, in general, educational institutions have not adapted to this more complex environment. Increasingly, potential students may live in every part of the world, may be fluent in multiple languages, and may work at jobs that require them to travel frequently or to change their residence location frequently. They may wish to take classes at the workplace, as they travel, or at home.