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Perspectives

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Remember Visicalc? One of the earliest electronic spreadsheets, Visicalc was a great boon for the beleaguered bean-counter, circa 1980. Visicalc begat Excel and eventually spawned an entire suite of office productivity tools.

As quickly as you can say Lotus 1, 2, 3, we needed computers and modems to work at home. Did Visicalc pave the way for Myst and AOL buddy lists? Although I can't prove it, it's pretty clear that the personal computer revolution began as a corporate desktop phenomenon. Once home, it began to elbow its way around the television and video game player to stake out its territory at the electronic hearth.

We're about to go through a similar revolution in education as corporate training leads to e-learning at home in prime time. E-learning is more than a research tool, more than fact-finding. It is the fulfillment of clear learning objectives in a structured format under the leadership of a knowledgeable instructor. E-learning will create a new kind of global classroom that will bring the university into the living room, using the interactivity, immediacy and intelligence of the Web to erase our bad memories of instructional television and correspondence courses.

Today, a generation of corporate employees is being trained via computers. Pick your favorite industry analyst to guess whether corporate training will be a \$20-\$50 billion business in 2005. However, the technology is crude and the marketplace crowded with too many players. Still drunk on dot-com capital, the sector is headed for a major shakeout.

Consolidation is inevitable, but so is the trend of e-learning. The rapidly-changing knowledge economy must train and retrain its top employees. Computer-based training is simply more convenient, less expensive and more

individualized than classroom training. And, the technology is improving all the time, with better bandwidth and learning management systems to deliver personalized and interactive applications.

It took a decade to get from Visicalc to Myst. We had to learn how to use personal computers. We knew no Windows, we surfed no net. And soon, DOS will be as obscure an acronym as "cc" is for a generation that has never seen carbon paper!

The shift from corporate training to consumer e-learning, from Java to geometry and Shakespeare, will be much faster, facilitated by our familiarity with computers and our motivation to keep up with changes in our professional and personal fields of interest. An employee who gains a skill or insight via a corporate training exercise will be quick to see its power for learning beyond IT and advanced PowerPoint.

This has significant social implications as well. Just as corporate training has the potential to subvert corporate hierarchies by making specialized training more readily available to a broad range of management levels, e-learning holds the promise of democratizing higher education. We can't build campuses fast enough to serve the growing number of adult learners, particularly in developing countries. Online classrooms are an efficient and important way to open up the expertise and resources of research institutions to new kinds of students all over the world.

There are, of course, differences between corporate training and e-learning. The ultimate success of consumer e-learning depends on the willingness of our great teachers to find new ways to teach us. Corporate training will rely more on technology than on the individual voice of a teacher. What will motivate our great teachers? I'm guessing the same things that led them to the classroom in the first place: the desire to communicate their ideas, lead a dialogue about the subjects they love most and engage an interested group of students.

Still, for teachers as well as for students, the real classroom will always trump e-learning - just as I'd rather have breakfast with my daughter than exchange instant messages, just as I'd rather stand in the company of a Vermeer than see a digital image. But when my daughter is away, and the Vermeer is locked up in the museum, I rely on these digital proxies.

We have never had a more promising way to learn.



Dr. Ann Kirschner is the president and CEO of Fathom Knowledge Network, an interactive knowledge network that provides online learning. Co-founded by Columbia University and Kirschner, Fathom is composed of some of the world's leading universities, museums, libraries, publishers and research institutions, including London School of Economics and Political Science, Cambridge University Press, The British Library and The New York Public Library. Prior to joining Fathom, Kirschner was a media and marketing pioneer in broadcast television, cable, satellite and interactive media.

Her start-ups include the first full-channel cable teletext service, Request; the first home satellite broadcast networks, PrimeTime 24; the first sports league on satellite television and the Internet, NFL Sunday Ticket and NFL.com. Dr. Kirschner serves on the board of directors of New York New Media Association, Theatreworks USA, the Topps Company and the Princeton University English Department Advisory Council. To learn more about Fathom Knowledge Network, visit www.fathom.com.

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