

Christine Geith

The Seven Futures of American Education: Improving Learning & Teaching in a Screen-Captured World¹ – a book review

The author posits that American society, and to a great extent its education system, are cyberized – meaning adapted to digital technology to the extent that we depend on it as much as we depend on electricity. He argues that cyberization is an effective lens through which to understand the transformational undercurrents affecting American education.

Part I of the book, provides a framework for understanding current trends. The different levels on which cyberization is occurring are identified and the important role of online learning in education is described. Transformational shifts including changes in the nature of knowledge, the drive for access and success for everyone and the shift away from expert authority are discussed. The changing relationship between business and educational institutions is explained.

Part II organizes the trends into practical applications. Six scenarios make meaning out of the transformational shifts and changing relationships. „Free Market Rules”, „Standards Rule” and „Cyberdystopia” are potential outcomes of a focus on efficiency, standardization and mechanization of human labor. „Free Learning Rules” is a scenario resulting from seemingly anarchic forces. „Steady as She Goes” is a testament to the durability and incremental adaptability of existing social systems. The „Education Improves” scenario harnesses change to realign education to focus on improving teaching and learning by re-valuing the roles of teachers and students.

¹ John Sener, *The Seven Futures of American Education: Improving Learning & Teaching in a Screen-Captured World* CreateSpace, North Charleston 2012.

In Part III, Sener delineates clear strategies for using cyberization for education system improvement. These include expanding on the strategic value of online learning; focusing on re-empowering teaching and learning through cyberized learner-centered models; and cyberizing the knowledge creation and academic credit-awarding functions of institutions. In the final chapter, Sener describes a seventh win-win scenario where cyberization meets a shift where everyone's education really matters in America.

Part I: Trends and Transformational Shifts

Sener argues that cyberization enables the American education system to massively and rapidly improve to „...keep up with the rising expectations which have accompanied its growing importance to society”².

This section of the book provides a framework for understanding the how and why of cyberized education. The framework highlights shifts in the notions of knowledge, access, authority and relations with business. The changing nature of knowledge is a fundamental shift affecting the core methods of education. The shift in the notion of access to higher education is described as moving from a nicety for the few to a necessity for the many; shifting to a universal right; and moving from traditional to non-traditional students as the new undergraduate majority. The shift in the notion of authority is described as moving from imposed authority to self-initiated, negotiated, and shared authority. As part of this shift, the demographic growth in youth to a formidable economic, cultural and communications force is resulting in students having more power as customers and participants. Shifts in relations with business highlight the ways in which educational institutions are more dependent on business for alignment with jobs and how the free market mentality is being applied to education as a market sector.

The cyberization of society has changed education. Online education has been the „leading wedge” of this change. Online education is a continuum with entirely online courses at one end, entirely ‘face-to-face’ courses at the other end, and a huge range of blended options in between. Sener traces the growth of cyberization of education from the industrial-era mass media such as radio and television; to the networked-based communication of Norbert Weiner, Buckminster Fuller and Ivan Illich; the computer assisted instruction of Sidney J. Pressey and

² J. Sener, *The Seven Futures of American Education: Improving Learning & Teaching in a Screen-Captured World*, 2012, Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 3322-3327.

B.F. Skinner; and the creation of the World Wide Web. These converged in a model called asynchronous learning networks which was advocated for, and funded, by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation leading to the mainstreaming and legitimizing of online education throughout U.S. higher education. „Between fall 2002 and fall 2009, the number of students in U.S. higher education grew by less than two percent per year, while the number of students taking online courses grew ten times as fast, at an annualized rate of almost 20 percent”³.

The research on online education indicates its quality benefits and its strategic benefits to institutions. The growth and benefits of online education, however, have not yet materialized in K12 education in the U.S. due to more complexity, scrutiny, skepticism, caution and little need to open up access which was the initial driver of its adoption in US higher education.

Part II: Future Cyberized Education Scenarios

Sener develops six scenarios for the future of cyberized education ranging from those dominated by efficiency and the market, to those ruled by disruption, that have an educational improvement focus. Sener also notes tensions between American values such as equality and diversity; authority and freedom. These societal values that are continuously renegotiated in American society and reflected in our social institutions including higher education.

Free Market Rules: Business and efficiency win

In this scenario, education is seen as a commodity of information transmission. The market overcomes structural barriers and leads to efficiency, innovation and lower costs. Learning becomes a commodity transaction; the multiple roles of higher education become job preparation; students become consumers; complex buying behavior becomes driven by cost; and diverse public-sector education values become profit. This scenario reflects popular rhetoric as market forces become stronger than current public policy and public investment in higher education.

³ *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 1001-1002.

Standards Rule: Cyberization enabling consistency wins

In this scenario, quality becomes test scores; knowledge becomes a body of content that needs to be mastered; and great content is equated with great education. This scenario promotes an education monoculture where the responsibility for improving results is not directly placed on students at any level. Oversimplification of complex variables in exchange for consistency wins in this scenario.

Free Learning Rules: Openness wins

Free open content and peer interactions create free education in this scenario. In this oversimplification of education into the act of learning, the aspects of academic credit and accreditation are being re-negotiated. This scenario also tends to equate quality to quality content.

Cyberdystopia: The dark side of cyberized education

This scenario focuses on the loss of capacity as we depend more and more on technology and on fear of new dangers created by technology. As Sener describes it, „...business completes a hostile takeover of education, turning schools into glorified vocational training centers; the efficiency of standardized education engineers the humanity out of us; key human interactions are ‘relentlessly devalued’ by computers and networks, turning us into isolated robots”⁴.

Steady as She Goes: Education endures

In this scenario, Sener focuses on the durability of education institutions manifesting as resistance, stasis, and incremental change. The counter forces to durability include rising costs and higher demand for increasing output in terms of increasing the number of graduates. This scenario is primarily business as usual.

Education Improves

This scenario focuses on improving teaching and learning; not just being better than traditional classroom instruction. Cyberization applies to all formal education, not just online

⁴ *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 1853-1855.

education, and it realigns education with redefined knowledge, broader access and renegotiated authority. This scenario enhances the roles and value of teachers and the value of students.

Part III: Cyberization Strategies

In this final section, Sener describes key strategies for using cyberization to improve education, including the strategic role of online education, strategies for (re-)empowering learning and teaching in education, and strategies for revitalizing the educational enterprise on the institutional level. He frames this section with this statement: „Beyond access to educational resources, content, or interaction, the core of formal education consists of two things: the teaching and learning relationship, and the institutional enterprise which supports that relationship and the many other vital societal functions which education is called upon to fulfill”⁵.

Strategies for re-empowering the teaching and learning relationship feature learner-centered engagement. Examples include learner-generated content and knowledge; event-anchored learning; social and individualized learning with scale and with depth; techno hooks such as augmented reality, virtual worlds and gaming; and sensible assessment.

Strategies for revitalizing the institutional enterprise feature new models for core functions. For example: expanding the merit-based credit system through prior learning assessment and credit by portfolio; serving a wider variety of students through stackable credentials and competency-based approaches; expanding the knowledge-creation function of education, particularly using student work; and creating new institutional assessment systems.

The book ends with a seventh scenario: *The Distant Scenario: Education rules*. This is a future in which society acts as if everyone’s education matters. In our large, heterogeneous society this is unprecedented. Seeking fixes oversimplifies and looks backward; this scenario requires a different starting point – one of massive improvement. „Our overly free market-oriented society is based on creating winners and losers, which is incompatible with valuing everyone’s education. We are far from knowing how to resolve the competing demands of

⁵ *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 2399-2401.

equality and diversity. We are even farther from knowing how to balance individual rights with society's needs in a way that would make valuing everyone's education possible”⁶.

Conclusion

Sener communicates a keen understanding of the shifts in the foundations of American education institutions and the tensions in societal values. His first-hand knowledge of the evolution of online education in America provides a unique perspective imbedded in the cyberization notion that is the premise for the book. Sener provides seven compelling scenarios based on a comprehensive and insightful understanding of current trends affecting American higher education, as well as K-12 education.

The Free Markets and Standards Rule scenarios describe a focus on efficiency, consistency and education as commodity. Free Learning Rules and Cyberdystopia describe a more emotional response to the trends. Steady As She Goes and Education Improves focus on social barriers and opportunities. The Distant Scenario, is a call to action taking the best of all points of view and leveraging the trends and foundational shifts to create high-quality education for everyone. These well-developed future scenarios provide a variety of lenses through which to understand the current landscape of change in American higher education.

⁶ *Ibidem*, Kindle Locations 3332-3335.