



**MONICA MARTINEZ**

*The “knowledge economy” presents opportunities to create seamless learning that puts schools at the center of our communities.*

## The Learning Economy

There is an increasing consumer value on personal growth that is driving a diverse market for educational and learning products ranging from food, toys, and games to housing and travel. Think about it. We eat specific kinds of food or take supplements that will help sharpen our minds. We buy toys for newborns that enhance their developmental and cognitive skills and games to enhance learning for children and even adults. More often than in the past, many of us book travel and social opportunities that expand our learning, whether it's about food, history, literature, wine, or any niche interest.

Because we live in the “knowledge economy,” knowledge is the crucial resource. The pervasive use of technology, the Internet, and social networking makes it cost-effective to serve niche markets with learning opportunities. The number of informal learning opportunities that will be available for an adult, yet less those for school-aged children, will be enormous. This will easily translate into a formalized system of production and exchange of multiple learning resources that will make up a learning economy. As a result, individuals and organizations from inside and outside of the formal public education system will be part of a diverse market of personalized, diverse, and niche learning opportunities for students. Organizations that once weren't considered part of the public education market now offer concrete benefits that are evaluated alongside the formal school system. In the learning economy, “school,” particularly the brick and mortar version, owns only one part of the learning economy.

This isn't hard to imagine. Parents are already exploring alternative educational and learning opportunities for their children. For instance, homeschooling has been one of the fastest growing education trends in the United States. Homeschooling provides an alternative form of education that allows parents to bypass the public school system by teaching their chil-

dren at home. Online learning, or virtual schools, is another growing trend and is even being used by homeschoolers. According to *T.H.E. Journal*, more than 2 million preK-12 students take some form of schooling online right now — whether attending a virtual school for all their classes or just taking one or more courses through the Internet. “The number of students taking courses online will jump to more than 10 million by 2014,” claims this article (Nagel 2009). Online schools provide enormous flexibility in scheduling and the type of courses offered — core curriculum classes, credit recovery classes, accelerated learning opportunities, and more rigorous classes or enrichment courses (Nagel 2009). Parents who want a public school option also are enrolling their children in charter schools. While more than 4,900 charter schools serve more than 1.5 million students ([www.chartergrowthfund.org](http://www.chartergrowthfund.org)), this is still a small sector of public schools.

Consider the array of enrichment services being offered directly to consumers — parents and students. Some were designed for enhanced or cultural learning and others for students with learning challenges. Numerous supplemental education services, such as Sylvan Learning Services, originally used to help students with learning challenges, are now being marketed as entities that can accelerate learning. Some product developers have suggested that “homework has been outsourced” as a result of the increase in tutoring companies across India that are helping American children complete their homework and prepare for tests (Rai 2005).

Open source courseware, shared curriculum repositories, home-school community networks, and many other bottom-up activities are unbundling education from the traditional system and providing children and families with new ways to experience learning. A growing system of free and easily accessible online learning resources is supporting students, educators, and parents.

Education companies, with over \$80 billion in annual revenues, already constitute a large sector in the education arena. According to the

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Education Industry Association (EIA), education is quickly becoming a \$1 trillion industry, representing 10% of America's GNP and second in size only to the health care industry. EIA estimates that federal and state expenditures on education will soon exceed \$750 billion annually. EIA believes the education industry plays an increasingly important role in supporting public education by meeting the demand for products and services that both complement and supplement basic education services.

### Seamless Learning

If we could consider all of these learning resources — whether at home, online, in school, informal, or supplemental — as part of a coherent system of learning resources, then school could be the main “hub” of formal learning and other opportunities would run in tandem with school. We could be more deliberate in ensuring a seamlessness across learning opportunities.

Blended learning, or “hybrid schools,” is an example of integrating learning resources. Hybrid schools offer a blend of online or e-learning and face-to-face instruction and are increasingly popular in schools and colleges nationwide. According to a seven-year study by the University of Central Florida, when compared to equivalent, fully online courses, blended courses — the combination of face-to-face instruction with online learning and reduced classroom contact hours — have the potential to increase student learning while lowering attrition rates (Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal 2004). This could fundamentally redesign our instructional model to be more student-centric, to introduce new theories of learning, and perhaps to shift the education paradigm.

For example, at the School of One, a pilot program for middle school math students at Middle School 131 in New York City's Chinatown, student schedules are called playlists. These individual playlists identify lessons they must complete for the day, which can include virtual tutoring online, computer worksheets, or small-group lessons with a classroom teacher. A complicated computer algorithm generates each student's lesson plans. New York City Chancellor Joel Klein pointed to how transformational such an approach could be: “We're looking at a way that I don't think anyone has looked at — at the way children learn, pacing them at their own pace, all of it tied to the mastery of content and skill and achievement” (Medina 2009). The School of

One was named one of the top 50 inventions of 2009 by *Time* last fall (Nov. 12, 2009).

More common, but possibly equally as transformative are schools that use two modalities of learning through the classroom. For instance, the iSchool, a developing small school in New York City, prepares students for the state exit exam through online courses using outside vendors or developers. Multiple schools in the New Tech Network, particularly in such rural areas as Indiana, use Rosetta Stone — an interactive language learning software that teaches a new language by immersion and previously was marketed only to individual consumers — as the primary means of offering a foreign language. Schools and districts are buying software in bulk as a way to offer courses that they could not offer otherwise.

### Schools at the Center

Models for organizing learning experiences can diversify and extend beyond those found today in private, parochial, home schooling, and charter schools. Public schools can then become a hub in the midst of other networks. The challenge is to identify innovative ways for schools or districts to create relationships among various players in the expanding learning economy to ensure that everyone has equal access.

Do a little imagining about what this could look like: Someone in a community could map the tangible and intangible sources available in the learning economy. Imagine that there is an individual who taps the collective intelligence of their local community to identify emerging learning opportunities in the community, organize community members, and locate community resources for learning. Or imagine that every student has an education adviser who is assigned by certified local education agencies — such as schools, resource centers, and libraries — or selected and contracted by families and who supports families to create, nurture, and maintain integrated and personal learning resources for their children.

Education institutions would no longer be the exclusive agents of coordination, service provision, quality assurance, performance assessment, or support. Other organizations would be equipped to provide these functions and diversify the system. Would this create a robust learning economy or lead to an inequitable distribution of learning resources? Would this create a new paradigm for learning and new roles for learners? Some food for thought.

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File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k1003mar.pdf**

**Monica Martinez, INNOVATION: The Learning Economy,  
Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 6, March 2010, pp. 74-75.**

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