Abstract:

Anya Kamenetz enthusiastically writes about the coming transformation of higher education in her book DIY U: Edupunks, edupreneurs, and the coming transformation of higher education (2010). She describes how technology and social media are changing the way education is delivered and encourages the grass-roots efforts of “edupunks” and “edupreneurs” who are creating new paths to learning. This critical review discusses the psychological, technological, and social implications of a “do-it-yourself” or learner-centered education, which is overlooked in the book.

Key Words:

Higher Education, Teaching and Learning, Active Learning, Technology, Social Media.

Review

DIY U (2010) examines the world of higher education from historical, sociological, and economical perspectives. The author, Anya Kamenetz, discusses the many concerns that have risen from America’s “college for all” ideology and presents a need for a more student-centered approach to education. The first part of the book illustrates the need for educational reform; the second section describes how technology such as open and distance education is changing the face of higher education institutions and how they service students. Kamenetz suggests that issues regarding educational reform should focus on rapidly rising costs, stagnant graduation rates, and a dismal economy with limited employment opportunities. To address some of these concerns, Kamenetz urges society, students, and higher education institutions to support multiple pathways to success.

DIY U urges students and institutions of higher education to challenge their status quo by illustrating existing and innovative options that will help tailor higher educational programs to better meet the needs of individuals. Kamenetz highlights those who have successfully completed a “Do-It-Yourself University (DIY U),” and has coined the terms...
“edupunk” and “edupreneur” to describe this new kind of innovator. An edupunk is someone who goes against the educational norm by pursuing a non-formal education using open and online educational resources, and an edupreneur is someone who creates learning or career opportunities for themselves. The author implies that DIY U, led by the edupunks and edupreneurs, will break down the four walls of academia through technology, out-of-the-box thinking, and self-determination.

While Kamenetz synthesizes a variety of factual data to support the identified problems and needs, her call-to-action and proposed solutions are vague, misleading, and lack empirical evidence. The purpose of this review is to evaluate the main tenant of DIY U, which suggests that a learner-centered education using technology and other non-traditional formats will spark a transformation of higher education. This review will discuss the psychological, technical, and social factors involved in a do-it-yourself education.

The Psychology of a Do-It-Yourself Education

In order to create and succeed in a “DIY U” or do-it-yourself education, one must be self-motivated, focused, and tenacious. This may be a very challenging obstacle for some individuals. Kamenetz inadequately addresses these psychological factors that affect learning. For example, the Resource Guide provides numerous references to websites and educational content, but it does not provide specific strategies or resources to help students overcome challenges that may hinder their success (p. 136).

Overcoming psychological barriers is a difficult process that begins by challenging preconceived notions, influenced by societal norms and beliefs that there is only one correct way of doing things. Students must realize they have choices in their higher educational pursuits, and conventional ways of doing things are not best for everyone. Kamenetz argues that our country’s college for all mentality be revised to success for all because, as we know, college is not the only path to success. However, considering multiple pathways to success requires a big change in thinking, and this cognitive reframe may be very difficult to make given that social conditioning may have ingrained a belief that college is the only road to success. Kamenetz suggests that only when individuals break from the conditioning of societal norms can they carefully evaluate all educational options and determine the best approach to reach their goals. Furthermore compelling stories of people who have succeeded in creating their own do-it-yourself education convey an overall tone that implies anyone can be an edupunk or edupreneur, and, thus, overly simplifies the interplay of factors that influence an individual’s learning and motivation. Pursuing a do-it-yourself education requires more than simply having a “just do it” attitude.

Technology: Online and Open Source Learning

Technology has provided a wealth of free or low-cost resources to fuel every kind of do-it-yourself education such as open journals, wikieducator, iTunes U, YouTubeEDU, Peer2Peer University, and much more. Kamenetz illustrates how open-source technology has led to open-courseware projects at many universities and has created open schools such as Open High School of Utah and open universities. However, many of the technologies are still not accessible to all individuals. Research on the digital
divide shows that females, low-income students and students of color are often technologically underprepared; however, “knowing how to utilize the technological ecosystem of university life is certainly critical for academic success” (Goode, 2010). Technology aptitude or preparedness is an important factor affecting students’ success, and, astonishingly, it is not discussed in the book.

Online courses require a great deal of active and independent learning on the part of the student, which may be a difficult adjustment for students who are comfortable with the traditional face-to-face approach. Social Constructivism highlights the importance of achieving the right balance between the degree of structure and flexibility in the learning environment and role of the instructor/facilitator in scaffolding or steering the educational experience to assist the student in mastery (Kim, 2001). Kamenetz also indicates the benefits of a hybrid educational model stating “psychology studies have shown in multiple contexts that human beings get all kinds of benefits in motivation, creativity, and productivity from being physically around other living, breathing humans” (p. 103). However, Kamenetz fails to articulate clearly that while technology and media are important components of balanced curriculum design, the knowledge and needs of the target audience should determine the degree of involvement.

Conclusion

The tag line on the back cover of the book reads: “A REVOLUTION IN HIGHER LEARNING: AFFORDABLE, ACCESSIBLE, AND LEARNER-CENTERED.” However, the true message of DIY U is not to predict the transformation of higher education, as the book implies, but to encourage the transformation of the student. Philosopher Peter Block said “We must act as if our institutions are ours to create, our learning is ours to define, our leadership we seek is ours to become.” It is safe to presume that most students will pursue a traditional higher educational path, regardless of whether it is exclusively in-person, online, or a hybrid instructional model. The guiding principle of the book is not what path to pursue, but rather, the idea that schooling must be self-directed.

References


