

World Knowledge Forum 2013

Bye Bye Classrooms

While Jeremy Johnson, the Co-Founder and Chief Strategy Officer of 2U, and Daphne Koller, the Co-Founder of Coursera, Inc., supported the idea of growing online education, Peter Baumann, Professor of Philosophy at Swarthmore College, maintained the necessity for face-to-face interactions in the panel entitled "Bye Bye Classrooms" at the 14th Annual World Knowledge Forum.

The need to enable access to this kind of education rapidly serves as one of the main tenants of Dr. Koller's company. She affirmed, "Education is the great democratizer, and the ills that plague society can be largely ameliorated with educated people. You could list them; extreme poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, even AIDS or anything that could diminish considerably through education."

Dr. Koller also affirmed that "the death of the large [offline] lecture hall" will benefit everyone as the world moves to an online education-prone planet.

Even though Mr. Johnson's company exhibits similarities to Dr. Koller's, his company hones in on creating better access to an already established education system. With 2U, colleges such as the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California have maintained their admissions standards and graduation rates, as well as maintained and improved their job placement rate.

"Scale [the college program] without reducing quality," stands as one of the main philosophies for Mr. Johnson.

Dr. Baumann, however, promoted the keystone of personal interaction in the classroom. "My hunch is that some things should be done online and that higher education cannot be done completely online," he said.

Dr. Baumann also stressed serendipity as one of the benefits of a classroom, and cited the ambiguity of the many forms of grading. "I don't do multiple choice tests. I like to see essays," he said, as he prefers to understand the actual thought processes of his students.

Changing gears and joking about the forum, he asked, "Can't we do this online?"

Dr. Koller then suggested that Dr. Baumann's hesitation was based on online education stereotypes. Using the evolution of film as an analogy for her model of online education, she recalled the older

days of film and adjusting media, stating that it was not perfect. "That was because that was the very earliest stages of [film], before people understood the new medium and what gave us the movies we have today. I think it is useful to not criticize the technology from ten years ago, but think about what's there today," she explained.

In terms of grading, Mr. Johnson offered his view of the power of unity. "The real difference, I think, is not a function of online versus offline, but rather synchronous versus asynchronous," he said.

The style of teaching met much scrutiny from the panelists. The question of having actors rather than professors serve as those being filmed and distributed across the globe was brought up.

Dr. Koller firmly objected. "There's a certain authenticity and genuineness of having the scholar explain his or her own work," she stated. "The people actually like seeing the professors based on the video. It makes them feel connected to the person who's brainchild to the course."

Mr. Johnson also expressed his opposition to this idea, stating, "It's not a function of actors; ultimately, it's a function of who delivers [the lecture]."

A rather controversial statement from Dr. Koller arose when posed the question about potentially shifting the consumer audience to a younger variety. "I don't think that computers are the right way to teach a seven-year-old to read," she started. Focusing on higher education in an online format is what she stressed. "The overall benefit to society is much better; it's a better use of money," Dr. Koller concluded.