

World Knowledge Forum 2013

Salman Khan - Shaping the Next 50 Years of Education

During the 14th annual World Knowledge Forum, Salman Khan, the founder of the online educational resource Khan Academy, highlighted the importance of education and ways that Khan Academy is utilizing technology to revolutionize education. According to Mr. Khan, "This is not a once in a lifetime opportunity. It's more like a once in a millennia opportunity."

Khan Academy's story began with a 6th grade mathematics placement test. Based on the results, Khan's 12 year-old cousin was placed in a remedial math class. Understanding the possible long-term effects, Mr. Khan stated, "Some careers may be off limits for her just based on one decision from 6th grade." As a result, he began his journey as a tutor, internet sensation, and educational pioneer.

After helping his cousin progress to college calculus, Mr. Khan decided to quit his job as a hedge fund analyst and devote his time and resources solely to his vision. In 2009, he filed Khan Academy as a not-for-profit organization with a mission "to provide a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere."

While reflecting on the risks involved at the time, Mr. Khan said, "Every time you try to do something entrepreneurial, especially not-for-profit entrepreneurial, you have to be a bit naïve. You have to be delusional."

Luckily for Mr. Khan, his creation eventually caught the eyes of some influential people, including Bill Gates and representatives of Google. Based on his mission and vision for the revolution of education, Khan Academy finally received the resources to become a "real organization."

The idea that Mr. Gates and other investors bought into was a "competency-based system," in which students can prove that they are proficient at something very basic, and then "move on to a more advanced topic."

Conversely, Mr. Khan argues that the current model of classroom lectures, homework, and tests rarely leads to mastery. This, he said, is because after the test, regardless of the results, "the class moves on to the next concept." He then compared this to constructing a building upon a flawed foundation. Eventually, "the building will collapse."

While emphasizing the flaws he sees in traditional education, Mr. Khan understands that his lectures alone are not revolutionary. "These lectures are not a new and amazing thing. People have been doing lectures for a long time. We view these lectures as tools for personalization of learning."

The emphasis on personalization and self-paced learning was a theme throughout Mr. Khan's talk. "The lecture is no longer the focal point of the classroom. And as soon as the lecture is no longer the focal point, you don't have to have everyone learning at the same pace, mastering concepts before moving on. A lot of class time can now be about students helping each other and the teacher doing focused interventions."

Mr. Khan also acknowledges the shift in demand from mechanical skills and learning towards a creative and knowledge-based economy. Regarding the use of Khan Academy in schools, he said, "I view these tools as a way to take lectures off the table so that electrical engineering classes can look more like philosophy seminars."

Additionally, the Khan Academy approach allows students to "take ownership of their own learning." Mr. Khan cites an example of an underprivileged school in Oakland, California, where student math scores went from the 7th percentile to the 94th after only one year of utilizing Khan Academy's resources. The teacher credited Khan Academy with changing student views of the teacher; instead of being seen as an enemy, they were viewed as being "on my side."

With more than 10 million unique users in over 200 countries, Mr. Khan has set his sights on the future. Moving forward, Khan is focused on increasing access worldwide via translation and sister sites in all of the major world languages. The current translation project already includes languages from Bengali to Farsi.

Mr. Khan also understands that the shift from traditional classrooms to a more universal and competency-based system will be a process. He stated, "Structural change in schools will take a long time. It's really more of a mindset change." But he remains confident, "It's not if, but when," this shift will occur.