

The Rapidly Changing Online Learning Landscape

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A paradigm shift in education is beginning to make waves across the world. One way this shift can be characterized is by the personalization of education. One of the best explanations is from the famous talk of Sir Ken Robinson (<http://sirkenrobinson.com/skr/watch> “Changing Education Paradigms”) but there are many ways this is taking form. The Internet is a major tool used to help make education more personal. The Internet can personalize education by bringing together resources in ways that simply cannot be done in most traditional classrooms. Different learning styles may be addressed with different activities, individualized assessments that can identify and remediate deficiencies, hands-on learning can be introduced, and various perspectives on a topic can be brought together in one place. I believe that we are just now beginning to see a new wave on online learning take place. Some signs of this wave are things like M.I.T.x, the new online learning initiative from MIT. While online course content from MIT is not new, the ability to earn some type of online certificate is. While not the same value as an MIT degree, it is a start. There are other startups, many flush with cash from investors, that are eager to fill this new space. Most of these efforts have focused on providing quality online course content for free. There are still many questions left to be answered. What value will these online certificates have? What role will universities and university faculty play? How will these work as a business model? While there are significant hurdles, it is clear that things are changing rapidly. How should the engineering educational community respond to this change? First, we must not ignore it. We cannot assume that things will always be the way they were. Change is inevitable and it makes a lot more sense to be the change than to be left behind. Second, we should continue to develop great content and highlight and share what works. Third, we need to support efforts to determine how we can make learning better both online and in the traditional classroom. While it is easy to be cynical about this paradigm shift, there are also great possibilities. Let’s be open to the possibilities.