

Foreword to the Chinese Edition

Open. If there is a word to describe this book, it is that short, convenient one we use every day to announce our respective arrivals and departures. We open doors. We open rooms. We open buildings. We open parks, zoos, and museums. But, today, the world is open. And I am making my case that it truly is open by prominently using that word in my book title. Many may counter that such a simple title can be confusing and contentious. What or where exactly is this open world that I am talking about? Is there a huge neon sign planted somewhere on Earth that says “Open for Business?” Would astronauts see the word “Open” when circling above it? Surely they can easily discern the blue oceans, the green forests, the barren deserts, and the masses of ice covering Greenland and Antarctica. They can also see your Great Wall when circling the planet some 250 miles above it in the International Space Station. But how would those flying above Earth recognize it is open? How would you know it is open? And what do I mean by the word “open”?

The openness that I am referring to relates to human learning and education. Helping to set the stage for a discussion of this openness was a book by Thomas Friedman, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist from the New York Times. In his 2005 book, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, he claimed that the world was flat. The flatness he had in mind was economic in nature. Throughout his book, Friedman accurately noted that technologies had converged to allow people to collaboratively create, market, and distribute innovative products across geographic time zones in ways never before seen. Technologies that were virtual, wireless, collaborative, and mobile were supercharging this process. Perhaps you are one of the millions of people who have read his book and become convinced by the premise or seen the ideas he points to in action. Without a doubt, Friedman offers economic hope as well as a framework or structure from which to reflect and debate the massive changes confronting us in the early stages of the twenty-first century. But not all people have had their lives changed for the better by this flatter world.

I can accept the premise that to some extent, the world of economics and business has become more flat. As noted, I use a different four-letter word, however, as my overarching metaphor in an attempt to help people visualize the world we have entered into. My word is “open,” not “flat.” The mantra surrounding a more open educational world is that—thanks to Web-based learning technology, including recent tools commonly referred to as the Web 2.0—anyone can now learn anything from anyone else at any time. Without much doubt, I am stretching the possibilities of free and open learning from technology beyond the reality of most people on this planet. At the same time, it is clear that we are living in a new age. Let’s call it the “learning age.”

What is happening today across all areas of education was not possible before. Never! Think about it. When could you instantaneously access students, experts, and instructors—not to mention text, audio, animations, simulations, and rich video resources—with the click of a button? Here in 2010, you can look up nearly any piece of information

that you want online. And you can talk to others in online discussions about what you have found. The world is open to bring in well-known experts, former students, or entire classes from other schools or universities to help out. For most of us who were born and raised in the previous century, one intensively based on instructor lectures or passive activities like television watching or radio listening, such educational possibilities are remarkable.

Do you feel the openness? Have you been affected by it or seen one of your friends or family members discovering and sharing exciting learning opportunities that they had never before encountered? New careers are born each moment today via online learning courses, resources, and associated advice and guidance from experts. Count to 10: 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . . 7 . . . 8 . . . 9 . . . 10. During that short time, there were likely millions of people around the world clicking on a Web link to what they believed to be a vital or intriguing learning resource that they did not know about previously or that they wished to review more deeply. Among these searches, there were individuals looking for medical information about some illness that they or a close family member have contracted. Alternatively, they may be interested in the outcomes of some hotly contested political race or highly advertised sporting event, the courses and degrees programs offered by nearby and distant schools and universities, the train schedules for different cities or countries, or the availability of basic or advanced language lessons in podcast format. Others in academic settings may be trying to locate the dates and keynote speaker information for a new conference or research papers and reports. Family members may also be seeking customer reviews of laptop computers, new cars, or popular books (perhaps a few were searching for more details on this very book). At the same time, still others were exploring thousands of other topics and items. But all were attempting to learn something—be it formal, informal, or both.

Their resulting learning was due to self-directed and purposeful browsing of the Web. Keep in mind, however, in those millions of clicks over that short span of time, thousands of people found a new interest area or topic to pursue that they did not anticipate. Let me restate this from a human potential standpoint. There are likely thousands of life-changing events occurring every ten seconds on the Web. It is difficult to estimate just how many of those hyperlinks would directly or indirectly lead the person to a new career. But it happens. People find new career paths, goals, and life purposes each day. They also find partners in which to pursue their life quests—both professional and personal.

In a way, such learning from free and open online resources, courses, and technologies gives our lives a richer meaning infused with a sense of optimism. People discover unique ways to grow personally each day and opportunities to help those around them develop their potentialities. As I write this foreword, I am listening in my car to an audiobook by Viktor Frankl called *Man's Search for Meaning*. This bestselling book has sold over twelve million copies since it first came out in 1959. Frankl, a survivor of four concentration camps during World War II—including the worst of these, Auschwitz, where more than one million people died—describes how some people have what others find to be an unfathomable resilience and the ability to survive extremely torturous events despite encountering the most severely repressive human conditions. While in these camps, for instance, Frankl did not know that both of his parents, his brother, and his pregnant wife had died, and only his sister had escaped by emigrating to Australia; as a result, Frankl

continued to live for them. At the same time, he also lived in the hope that one of his books could get published.

With such goals, there was value that he could contribute to the world. If Viktor Frankl had died during his years in the camps, and he came extremely close dozens of times, so too would have a field of psychotherapy he invented, known as “logotherapy.” Since his release, logotherapy has helped countless individuals around the world. A logotherapist believes that the main motivation in our respective lives is to find meaning. Such meanings can come from doing a kind deed for another, producing a product, or valuing or loving something or someone else. According to Frankl, a third way to discover meaning is from suffering, such as in concentration camps, when other forms of personal expression are not possible. He quotes Nietzsche in pointing out that when someone has a “why” to live, he can endure or bear any “how” or difficult situation. Humans have an internal will or striving to find meaning in life no matter their circumstances.

Suffice it to say that we members of the human race all need a sense of personal meaning and identity. Today the personally fulfilling meanings—the intimate or more casual relationships, the goals or personal life paths, and the opportunities to care or commit to someone or something—are often fervently pursued and ultimately realized online. Much of that meaning, of course, is embedded in our individual and group learning quests. Sometimes it is formal and at other times it is informal, or a bit of both. In a more open educational world, one intensified through a continually renewing host of Web-based learning technologies and instructional approaches, relationships and meanings are seemingly endless. We have only just arrived at the entry gate for Web-based learning. What I attempt to provide in this book is a simple way to make sense of these possibilities. If people truly understand the vast learning opportunities through which purpose and meaning can be actualized, we might experience a cultural shift in who we are and what we do as a species.

Such is life in the twenty-first century. It is a far cry from the previous one. The era I was born into, while in transition to the Information Age, still heavily relied on factories and obedient workers punching timecards. In fact, I experienced it firsthand, having worked in a couple of factories to earn enough money to pay for my college tuition. As we all realize, this all-too-often dehumanizing age of business and industry gave way in the latter part of the twentieth century to the information or communication age, when technologies emerged to help people connect, collaborate, and communicate more expediently. Some feel that we are now entering the age of globalization. I predict that in three or four decades people will reflect back on this time and call this the “learning age,” though globalization will certainly be front and center in such discussions. In effect, you and I are card-carrying members of this wonderful learning age and may not yet realize it.

Make no mistake, this is the learning century. The forms and types of learning we encounter at each moment of the day are twenty times more abundant and within reach than those to which my peers and I had access during grade school a few short decades ago. The multipliers would be much higher still when compared to the educational opportunities my grandparents had a century ago. And many educational resources at that time were reserved for the rich. During the past decade, open educational resources from such prestigious universities as Harvard, Yale, MIT, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, and Berkeley, to name but a few within the United States alone, take us from the educational world reserved

for the noble, the wealthy, and the pious to one available to everyone finding a functioning Internet connection. Technologies such as Moodle, YouTube, TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design), Facebook, iTunes, and Skype are enabling millions of people to learn something new as you read this very sentence.

I realize that many higher education institutions in China have embraced Moodle as their course management platform in addition to other open source technologies. However, if you have not explored or found access to shared online video resources like TED, Link TV, YouTube, TeacherTube, Academic Earth, or TV Lesson, you should try to find a way. I personally watched several twenty-minute videos in TED while taking a break from revising this document; three were about adventure learning stories at Mount Everest and the North Pole (accounts of people skiing to or swimming in these extreme places), and another was from Gordon Brown, the former prime minister of the United Kingdom, who made several incisive comments about how the Web can connect human civilization in a global way and offer hope in combating climate change. In addition to being quite informative, each of these videos was inspirational, engaging, and passionately presented.

I learned about climate change issues from a totally different perspective than that obtained from television documentaries, news stories, or academic articles. And I could start, stop, and replay each one as my time allowed. I was in control of my own learning. My teachers were coming to me online from events taking place in the far reaches of the globe. One of these TED videos was recorded five years ago and I personally knew the presenter, having interviewed him for one of my books, whereas another had just entered the news that very day. He too I will likely contact in the near future as part of my current research project on extreme learning. With various forms of communication and connectedness, the Web offers us not just information, but also access to the experts behind such information. In addition, we can quickly discover potential colleagues, peers, and mentors on a scale so massive, pervasive, and instantaneous that our sense of personal identity and competence is forever altered. And along with that, our concept of humanity is not some vague or vacuous concept, but is deeply rooted in our global interconnectedness.

How exciting it is to be alive at this very moment, especially as we humans have the internal wiring to search for purpose and meaning. There is much to find, filter, and feed anyone's personal quest for meaning each moment of the day. Humans have roamed this planet for millennia but at no time before have there been so many unique ways to learn and such a wide variety of people and cultures to learn from or with. China, like the United States, is an expansive country geographically, culturally, ethnically, and economically. However, it is the possibilities for educational expansion that I highlight in this book—because it is education, above all else, that has benefited from the emergence of the Web and has thrown all sectors of education, from primary school to corporate training, in a state of extreme flux. Today we do not just learn with those in our neighborhood, city, state, province, or country, but with people from vastly different regions of the world. As this happens, we gain new appreciation and insight into our fellow human beings and the successes, challenges, and frustrations of their respective learning journeys.

This book, in fact, is a journey; one that finds expression in at least three distinct ways. First, it is intended as a pilgrimage into our humanity. The chapters you will read offer insight into how the people of this planet have learned in the past and might alternatively learn in the future. It is an exploration of our human potentialities and as such,

may offer a glimpse of some aspect of the human species that has heretofore not been visible or as readily noticed. Might there be stages in human development not previously identifiable or perhaps even possible due to educational, social, cultural, or interpersonal limitations? Could the ability to take perspectives of other cultures through videoconferencing and other forms of Web interaction serve, at least in part, to connect seemingly disparate people or to reduce conflict and tension in and between highly volatile regions of the world? Could those sensing tragic injustices or insensitivities find greater understanding and common ground through the technologies and pedagogies of sharing and collaboration? The global interaction and feedback now possible online offer hope for advancing each of us in terms of our level of social cognition and perspective taking.

Second, *The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education* is a journey into the possibilities of using Web technologies for learning with those of any age, gender, ethnicity, or culture. So many technology tools are announced each month that have the potential to extend, enhance, or transform human learning. It is incumbent on us all to help determine how, when, and where we can. The tools you select may not ultimately matter; what does matter is that you can now explicitly and implicitly play a more self-determined role in your own learning and in that of your friends, family, and others you will likely never meet.

Third, this book offers a set of stories of people who have done their part, large or small, to use educational technology to bring about new learning opportunities for others. There are dozens of anecdotes about famous people and about individuals you have not heard of who have changed the world. Whether these learning pioneers are aware of it or not, they have each played a key role in bringing us to the doorsteps of the learning century. In writing this book, I wanted to highlight the fact that anyone can create a new learning tool or resource that can benefit learners and teachers alike around the world. Someday this might be you. What will you do to have an impact on any of the nearly seven billion people (that is, learners) of this planet? What, perhaps, have you already done?

Many people who have read my book since it first came out a year ago have asked me about my vision of the future. A few times each week I am asked if teachers will no longer be needed. Will new forms of universities replace old ones? Then there are personal questions such as whether people will record on their résumés all the free and open courses and materials that they have read through and pondered or responded to. Or if they should list the social networks, online communities, or wiki groups that they have joined. Others ask me which technologies will have the most impact on learning in the next five, ten, or twenty years. At the same time, parents and grandparents often walk up after I give a talk and ask me what they should tell their children to major in or which e-book reader or laptop they should purchase for their grandchildren. So many questions arise, from the highly specific to the global. I am humbled by the breadth of concerns and the depth of insights that many people possess about the advances of Web-based learning technologies and about the race toward a more free and open educational system.

It is always difficult to give a clear response to any of these questions. No one knows everything about Web-based teaching and learning or which technologies will find the most traction in education. Instead, most people in the field become experts in regards to some minor sliver of it. In response, I often point out that any predictions of the future are bound to be too conservative. What I do know is that during the coming decades we will all need

to pursue a wide range of new learning skills and competencies in order to be successful. Perhaps additional degrees or certificates will come along with it. In addition, humans will go through life with more teachers and learning partners than they ever had before, many of whom will be global rather than local. And learners will increasingly have the power to select or deselect those partners. They will also have more records of their respective learning interests and accomplishments. These records will be not only visual but also auditory. More important, there will be an assembly of people who arise to guide others through all this learning. We all need personal moments of reflection and wise individuals along our learning paths who can help us make sense of what we have just experienced.

Through the mass of possible predictions one thing is clear: learning will be the lone constant in life; not our jobs, political affiliations, friends, social outlets, hobbies, and so forth. We all strive to learn each day. I learn through an array of technologies including the Internet, television, radio, audiobooks as well as physical books, and simple pen and paper. As I wrote the first draft of this foreword, I was listening to an award-winning audiobook about Sir Winston Churchill. He accomplished much in his life, but Churchill is best known as the prime minister of United Kingdom during World War II, when he delivered many inspirational speeches. One of Churchill's most famous speeches came on June 4, 1940, before the House of Commons. It ended with the following quote:

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender and even if, which I do not for the moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, will carry on the struggle until in God's good time the New World with all its power and might, sets forth to the liberation and rescue of the Old.

This was a testament to the will of those in England to fight. It was replayed over and over during WWII to inspire not only troops in battle but also citizens being attacked by Nazi bombing raids every evening. This speech is still heard in resounding triumph today. But what if the quote was shortened and the word "surrender" was replaced with the words "quit learning," "fight" was replaced with "learning," and "island" was replaced with "chance for an education." The resulting passage would be:

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall learn in France and on the seas and oceans; we shall learn with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our chance for an education whatever the cost may be; we shall learn on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never quit learning.

As this rewritten quote makes clear, we all learn, and this learning can take place anywhere and at any moment we so choose. We learn when on an airplane, on a train, in a boat, climbing a mountain, or in a classroom. The Web offers learning possibilities to each

of us no matter where we happen to be. Today we have Internet access and mobile phone reception on land, at sea, and in the air. We have successfully pushed out learning to the extreme edges of humanity. Wherever we have sojourned, so too have educational possibilities arisen and been taken advantage of. Learning need not be restricted to a classroom building or a school. In truth, there is learning in each step we take as we walk outside our school grounds or our neighborhoods. This learning has intensified with online access joining with us along each of these steps.

This premise that WE-ALL-LEARN in myriad settings and environments, as you will soon discover, is the key message of this book. Do we need such a reminder? I doubt if anyone would believe that an advanced species such as ours would. However, it could also be the case that we are not so advanced. Perhaps the world is not a flatter one today but a more open one. Perhaps education is about to take center stage in human evolution, thereby usurping economic development as the key marker of those in power or in high demand. Perhaps emerging technologies for learning are a means to elevate humankind to a new level of development never before seen. How will we know when we have arrived at such a destination? Will developmental psychologists, historians, and anthropologists recognize and label it? Will educational leaders create ingenious ways to take advantage of it? Or might the changes be so subtle and emergent that we fail to properly identify and plan for it?

This open learning world exists for everyone: young and old, rich and poor, male and female, novice and expert, Chinese and American and everyone on the globe. There is no selectivity involved in whether people can enter it except insofar as they have access to the Internet or some downloaded derivation of it. Do you have access to the Internet? Does your family? How does access to a more open learning world affect our sense of identity or personal self-worth? Might it lead to a resounding belief that people can learn a new skill or trade when and where needed?

I am much delighted to have had several requests to translate this book into simplified Chinese. I am deeply indebted to Professor Jiao Jianli, director of Future Education Research Centre and deputy dean of the School of Information Technology in Education at South China Normal University. He and his highly skilled and dedicated team have spent many months translating my *World Is Open* book for you. I am also thankful for the people of East China Normal University who excitedly decided to publish the result. I hope that this translation sparks meetings, discussions, retreats, plans, and personal reflections in China and elsewhere about the ways in which emerging learning technologies can be thoughtfully used to refashion schools and universities in addition to corporate, military, or governmental training programs.

Without much doubt, the entire world will continue to look to China for indicators of how a country can effectively deal with immense societal changes, especially in the realm of education. China is an extremely powerful magnet that draws educational experts from around the world for conferences, debates, and summits. When I see the line-up of keynote and invited speakers coming to Beijing, Shanghai, or Hong Kong for some type of e-learning conference or educational technology event, I am always very impressed. When I talk to my colleagues here in the United States, I often compare the early part of the twenty-first century in Beijing to the 1770s and 1780s in Boston in the United States when many great individuals congregated to bring about a new form of government. Back then, such individuals were making a difference in people's lives through ideas, debates, news, and

politically inspired marches, riots, and armed battles. It was a physical as well as intellectual and cultural revolution. Today, the revolution and overriding change is not as much political as it is educational. It is a quieter, though no less important, revolution.

There is much to consider. Never before have there been so many ways to learn with technology. Never before have so many individuals expressed interest in a college education. As witnessed by the enrollment surges in higher education in China, millions of Chinese people are dreaming of higher forms of education than ever before. However, the construction of schools and universities and the associated infrastructure of transporting those who want such educational possibilities cannot keep up with this demand. In China, among young people and more senior people in the workplace seeking additional knowledge, however, there is optimism that Web technologies can offer learning outlets that satisfy this new thirst for learning. At the same time, the global economy is banking on them finding and succeeding in their online and blended learning pursuits.

Such are the bright lights paving the roads ahead for education today. The world is open for anyone's learning interests 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It does not stop offering learning on Friday night as people head home from school or work or when on holiday, vacation, or sick leave. This is certainly a revolution. But for the most part, this is a revolution of intellectual spirit, educational hope, and human optimism. To be sure, countless people have yet to participate in this educational revolution and there is no preset timetable as to when they will. However, we do know that with each additional Internet access node established, laptop purchased, and learning portal created, educational content and activities will soon be streaming down the pipes.

The coming decades will see more engaging and personally meaningful content. As this occurs, there will also be more familiarity with and acceptance of online learning pursuits. Soon we will drift our revolutionary boats into the bright blue waters of the learning century. That is where I believe we are headed. By no means have we landed there yet. But today in 2010, as I write this, we are treading closer to such a designation (that is, the learning century) and destination. After practicing in safe learning harbors within virtual worlds, simulations, games, and online forums, we will drop anchor and land our boats on shores that are more participatory, more global, and with more enriching, culturally relevant, and engaging learning experiences than any human cohort has experienced before. Some boats will undoubtedly sink or fall victim to educational pirates. Others will find their crews have lost their will to meaning and turn back to traditional teaching methods and procedures. But others will set sail to unknown learning destinations where they will charter and claim new territories that others have ignored or not risked searching for.

The learning century is still in its infancy. This is the time, however, for all of us to shape its direction and outcomes. The rest of the world will be carefully watching what happens in China. This monitoring is of prime interest because the range and extent of educational openness that is possible in China lies at the outer edges of the dreams of people anywhere else in the world. It is in China, therefore, that this Web-based learning revolution will find renewed momentum, direction, and purpose. Perhaps you will be among those crafting some innovative initiative, program, or agenda that will in turn change the lives of people you pass by each day on the bus, train, or local streets. You can make a difference, large or small, in what they learn and what they ultimately become and contribute back to

their respective families, communities, and society as a whole. What you do in open education will create completely new identities and possibilities.

I look forward to reading about how this revolution of educational openness plays out in China and in all of Asia. In the meantime, enjoy your personal quest for meaning in this increasingly open—not flat—learning world. And never quit learning, whether on land, at sea, or in the air.

Curtis J. Bonk
Indiana University, December 21, 2010