



Udacity and the future of online universities

By Felix Salmon | JANUARY 23, 2012

The most exciting (but also, in a small way, slightly depressing) presentation at DLD this year came from Sebastian Thrun, of Stanford and Google. Or formerly of Stanford, anyway.

Thrun told the story of his Introduction to Artificial Intelligence class, which ran from October to December last year. It started as a way of putting his Stanford course online — he was going to teach the whole thing, for free, to anybody in the world who wanted it. With quizzes and grades and a final certificate, in parallel with the in-person course he was giving his Stanford undergrad students. He sent out one email to announce the class, and from that one email there was ultimately an enrollment of 160,000 students. Thrun scrambled to put together a website which could scale and support that enrollment, and succeeded spectacularly well.

Just a couple of datapoints from Thrun's talk: there were more students in his course from Lithuania alone than there are students at Stanford altogether. There were students in Afghanistan, exfiltrating war zones to grab an hour of connectivity to finish the homework assignments. There were single mothers keeping the faith and staying with the course even as their families were being hit by tragedy. And when it finished, thousands of students around the world were educated and inspired. Some 248 of them, in total, got a perfect score: they never got a single question wrong, over the entire course of the class. All 248 took the course online; not one was enrolled at Stanford.

Thrun was eloquent on the subject of how he realized that he had been running “weeder” classes, designed to be tough and make students fail and make himself, the professor, look good. Going forwards, he said, he wanted to learn from Khan Academy and build courses designed to make as many students as possible succeed — by revisiting classes and tests as many times as necessary until they really master the material.

And I loved as well his story of the physical class at Stanford, which dwindled from 200 students to 30 students because the online course was more intimate and better at teaching than the real-world course on which it was based.

So what I was expecting was an announcement from Thrun that he was helping to reinvent university education: that he was moving all his Stanford courses online, that the physical class would be a space for students to get more personalized help. No more lecturing: instead, the classes would be taken on the students' own time, and the job of the real-world professor would be to answer questions from kids paying \$30,000 for their education.

But that's not the announcement that Thrun gave. Instead, he said, he concluded that "I can't teach at Stanford again." He's given up his tenure at Stanford, and he's started a new online university called Udacity. He wants to enroll 500,000 students for his first course, on how to build a search engine — and of course it's all going to be free.

Udacity looks great, and I can't wait for it to be a revolutionary success, educating and empowering students around the world, especially in places like Africa and India, and, in those places, especially women.

But I have to say I'm a little sad that it's happening away from, rather than being part of, Stanford. If any world-class university would embrace this idea, one would hope it would be the one at the heart of Silicon Valley. And surely Udacity would only benefit if it was part of Stanford and carried the Stanford brand name. Instead, Thrun is abandoning Stanford and creating Udacity on its own. (And I'm no great fan of the name, either.)

Stanford was willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars building a new physical campus in New York City — but it isn't willing, it seems, to help Thrun build a free virtual campus which could reach the whole world. That's a dereliction of its educational duty. But where Stanford has failed, surely some other elite university will step in. Thrun is taking a bold step here. Let's hope he soon gets the support, if not of Stanford, then of some other college. Like Harvard, or Yale, or Oxford, or Cambridge. They're exclusive places now. But they don't have to be, in the future.