Liberating Learning video transcript

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Terry M. Moe, interviewed by Eric Hanushek

Rick – Your new book is about technology and American education. Why do you call it Liberating Learning?

Terry – In part, the title reflects what technology has to contribute. We are in the midst of a revolution in info technology that is transforming human society around the world, and it can’t help but have profound implications for student learning.

Rick – How is it going to be beneficial?

Terry – Through programs of online learning, coursework can literally be customized to needs and learning styles of each child. Kids can get instant feedback on how they are doing, they can get extra help on the material they don’t understand, they can work at their own pace and according to their own schedules. And, regardless of where they live, from Detroit to Appalachia, they can gain access to a vast array of the best courses the world can provide.

Compare this to the traditional model of schooling—with 25 or 30 kids sitting in desks in a classroom listening to a teacher lecture and being offered a standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum that leaves some kids totally bored and others way behind. There is no need to be trapped by tradition; education can now be customized to each child.

Rick – But is it economical to customize education to each child?

Terry – In fact, online learning will make the education process far less expensive. For the first time in modern history, it is possible to substitute technology for labor in the education process—because tech can do much (but not all) of the actual teaching. And because tech is cheap and labor is extraordinarily expensive, this substitute makes it possible to spend the nation’s scarce resources much more productively. We can get much more bang for the buck this way. This is another enormous benefit of technology.

Rick – Isn’t there a danger that computers will take over and that kids will be learning at home, isolated from teachers and from social interaction?

Terry – Not really, because people don’t want that. We think that, in the future, most kids will still “go to school” but that the typical school will be a hybrid of the traditional and the high tech. There will be fewer teachers per student, and kids will get much of their academics online; but there will also be plenty of social interaction and personal attention.
Rick – So, with all these benefits, do you expect the American public school system to embrace technology with open arms? Seems to me technology has barely made a dent in the schools so far. What’s going on?

Terry – This is the other side of the equation. Precisely because technology has the potential to transform the fundamentals of public education, it is threatening to the established groups that operate the existing system, and these groups are politically powerful.

Especially the teachers unions. They are by far the most powerful players in the politics of education. They are using their power to resist the advance of technology and to make sure it does not transform the education system.

Rick – Why do they find technology so threatening?

Terry – Because fundamental change affects everything they care about—especially jobs and money. As I said, these innovations allow us to substitute technology for labor in the education process—which means fewer jobs for teachers. Also, because online schools can be located anywhere—geography is unimportant—they can attract students and money away from the local school districts. All this is deeply threatening.

Rick – But are they really that powerful? Can they really block change?

Terry – Yes, and they have been doing it for decades. This nation has been trying to improve its schools since the early 1980s, with disappointing results. The reason for the disappointment is that the teachers unions have used their power to block the most promising reforms—true accountability, real choice for parents and kids, pay for performance, getting bad teachers out of the classroom—all these and more are threatening to them, and they have blocked them.

The United States has never simply been able to do what works in reforming its schools because the major reforms are off the table—or are gutted or weakened.

Rick – Then why would technology be any different? Won’t they just block it too?

Terry – Technology is very different. It is not really a reform but a massive social force that is changing the whole world. The unions can’t keep it out. It is already seeping in—and this will continue. As it seeps in over a period of many years, it will have a surprising set of consequences—automatically, and without anyone’s intention, relentlessly operate to undermine the power of the unions. And this will transform the politics of education. Let me just give two examples:

One, it generates a substitution of technology for labor in education—which means that there will be fewer teachers per student in the future and fewer union members. Sheer numbers are the key to union power, so their power is going to suffer.
Another process has to do with geography. The traditional system concentrates kids and teachers within schools and districts—and makes teachers easy for unions to organize. But when online schooling proliferates, kids and teachers can be anywhere—they don’t all need to be in any one place—and many teachers will be widely dispersed rather than concentrated. This will make them much harder for unions to organize.

These are just two of a number of forces that technology generates—all of them working together, without intending to, to undermine union power.

**Rick** – So if the teachers unions become less powerful over the years, what effect will that have on American education?

**Terry** – This is the true meaning of the liberation of learning. When the unions can no longer block reform in the political process, technological innovations can flow through and provide kids with tremendous benefits for learning.

But that’s not all. With the unions unable to block them, the full range of promising reforms—true accountability, real choice, pay for performance, getting bad teachers out of the classroom, and much more—can flow through too.

More generally, politics will give much higher priority to best interests of kids, allow policy makers to do whatever works—whether high tech or not.

The result will be a new era in American education that may take a few decades. But the nation will finally be able to adopt reforms that make sense for kids and schools—which it’s never been able to do before. This is what we really mean by the liberation of learning.

**Rick** – Thanks, Terry. This sounds like a fascinating and provocative book—I encourage people to read it.