

## Book Review

*The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined.*  
Salman Khan. New York, NY and Boston, MA:  
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“Bliss was it that dawn to be alive,” wrote William Wordsworth, the canonical Romantic poet, “But to be young was very Heaven!” Born in 1770, he was remembering the joys of being an Englishman in France during the Revolutionary period.

Today, a tribe of exuberant, game-changing revolutionaries is storming, not the Bastille in Paris, but classrooms in America. Salman Khan is among the happiest and more attractive of these warriors. The One World Schoolhouse is his self-representation and a self-introduction to the world. It begins disarmingly, “My name is Sal Khan. I’m the founder and original faculty of the Khan Academy” (p. 1).

In part, the source of Khan’s likeability is the amiable, plain populism of his ambition for his eponymous Academy, “To provide a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere” (p. 221). Technology is the servant of this goal. If he succeeds, “tens of millions” of kids will gain access to education. The gap between rich and poor, between developed and developing societies, will vanish.

In part, the source of Khan’s likeability is his temperament. Although his publisher claims that the destiny of his book is to be “one of the most influential... about education in our time,” he is generous towards others, modest, and self-deprecating. He admits that his ambition might seem grandiose. Often wary of certainties, he resists believing that any one pedagogy—even his—will be best for one and all. He respects the complexity of the brain, the governor of learning. Unlike many reformers, he refuses to choose between the liberal arts and more utilitarian modes of education. Both have their virtues. He respects many teachers and shies away from bashing their unions. Although his manifesto is silent about the grand American pragmatic tradition, he often seems more pragmatist than revolutionary. “My personal philosophy,” he writes, “is to do what makes sense and not try to confirm a dogmatic bias with pseudoscience” (p. 131). Winningly, his pragmatism is joyous rather than cramped, for he celebrates the wonder, the excitement, the “magic” of learning.

*The One World Schoolhouse* seeks, even strains, to be earnestly conversational in tone. The book nevertheless echoes three mythic narratives that provide a ground bass in American culture. They resound beneath the four-part formal structure of the book: how he learned to teach; how

broken our current educational model is; how he brought his ideas to “the real world”; and how his breathless vision of the future, that one world schoolhouse, might operate.

The presence of these mythic narratives is still another source of Khan’s appeal. For his story fits with older, familiar tales that we hope might be true. One is the myth of origins, in which we learn about the beginnings of a hero who becomes capable of legendary deeds. Two others are less universal, more American, and echo each other. The first is that of the young men whom Horatio Alger (1832-1899) imagined so prolifically. Full of pluck, bestowed with some luck, they journey from rags to riches. Since the late 19th-century, such exemplary figures have become far more multi-cultural, including African Americans, immigrants, and even some women.

The second narrative focuses on the tinkerer, usually a man, fooling around in his barnyard or garage or kitchen, often in isolation, the beneficiary of “serendipity and intuition” (p. 33). If his experiments lead to inventions, and if he is entrepreneurial, he starts up a little company, and if he also has pluck and a dose of luck, he will build a Ford Motor Company, or a Hewlett Packard, or a Khan Academy. As of May 2013, the Khan Academy claims to have delivered over 250 million lessons - in English and a variety of other languages.

Born in Louisiana, Khan is the son of immigrants, his father a pediatrician from Bangladesh. He is reticent about his childhood, but one sentence points to family difficulties. Both he and his wife Umaima, he writes, “come from single-mother households whose earnings were slightly above the poverty line in a good year...” (p. 154). He goes to MIT, becomes a hedge fund analyst, and marries a doctor. At his wedding in 2004, he meets a young female cousin, Nadia, a bright girl who has done badly on a 6th grade placement examination in math. He volunteers to tutor her. After improvised math lessons delivered through computer, pen tablets, and long distance phone calls, Nadia successfully passes the test.

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This charming act of benevolence is the start of the Khan Academy. Through word of mouth among family and friends, the number of his tutees grows. As it does, the teacher changes. Psychologically, he realizes he has a vocation, a passion to pursue. Pedagogically, he writes new software, which improves his questions and his ability to follow his tutees’ answers. To manage the scale of his still pro bono enterprise, he posts his lessons on YouTube. He has no formal training as a teacher, but he is smart, caring,

and not afraid to fail. His lessons last for only ten minutes, because that is the time limit for a YouTube posting, but lo and behold, ten minutes is the length of his students' attention spans.

In 2009, with the encouragement of his wife and friends, he quits his secure job, and opens the Khan Academy, located in a closet in his home, now in California. At first only he is "faculty, engineering team, support staff, and administration" (p. 6), but he dares to dream of an educational transformation. Not only does he expand his curriculum to include basic arithmetic, calculus, physics, finance, biology, chemistry, and history. Not only does he attract millions of students to his lessons. Not only does he have the good sense to test out his methods in on-site programs. Not only does he build an organization. He attracts powerful and affluent supporters. One of them goes to the Aspen Ideas Festival and hears Bill Gates say that he is a fan of the Khan Academy, that he uses its videos for "his own learning and for his kids" (p. 158). Since the end of the 19th-century in the United States, foundations have provided much of the financial muscle for educational reform. As the Gates Foundation, Google, and other philanthropies offer their support, the Khan Academy shows their continued power.

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Although the Khan Academy depends on the charisma of its founder, it builds on three clusters of ideas, none original but articulated with buoyant, even breezy, enthusiasm. The first is a history of education, which blames "The Prussians" of the 18th century and their American acolytes for designing a rigid system that by mandate locks children into a classroom and then promotes them in lock-step from grade to grade. The "Prussian" legacy is a dangerously obsolete machine, incapable of stimulating curiosity and life-long learning, and carrying "... such a weight of orthodoxy and rust as to stifle the sincere creative efforts of even the best-meaning teachers and administrators" (p. 80). Colleges and universities, devoted to the "broadcast lecture" are equally deadening. I looked in vain for the names of such influential reformers as John Dewey (1859-1962) or Maria Montessori (1870-1952) or Jerome Bruner (1915--), but like most revolutionaries, Khan must dismiss the past in order to legitimate his brave new world that will replace it.

Far more appealing is Khan's Romantic picture of children. They are born intelligent, curious, with an active and natural love of learning. They should be like Alices in a benign wonderland. Though their schools balkanize knowledge, they delight in making connections. The more they learn, the more their brains, like those of adults, flourish---according to the contemporary neuroscience Khan uses. How, then, do they best learn? Khan's footnotes are sparse, but he does credit the Winnetka Plan of the

1920s and the psychologists Benjamin Bloom and James Block of the post-WWII period for the theory and practice of "mastery learning." No matter how long it might take, students should "adequately comprehend a given concept before being expected to understand a more advanced one" (p. 37). If they get stuck, they should struggle and push and prod themselves at their own pace until they get unstuck. Khan is fond of the homely metaphor of the "Swiss cheese brain." If we have mastered one part of a concept but not another, we have debilitating gaps and holes in our learning.

Holding the third cluster of ideas together is Khan's vision of the "One World Schoolhouse," a loving globalization of the one room schoolhouse of yore, with children of several ages sitting together on their benches, helping each other under the guidance of one teacher, a stripped-down community of learning. Khan rattles off suggestions for radical change in many current practices--such as tracking, homework, grading, testing, and the keeping of transcripts. But obviously, technology is the Driver, the Big Cheese, of revolution.

Technology enables "differentiated," or individualized, learning for students, each of whom has a "feedback dashboard" that shows in real time a leaping or crawling toward mastery. Because of technology, Khan can picture a large, cheery classroom with a team of teachers and students of various ages engaged in projects, including the arts. Khan is far more vocal about the dangers of age segregation within schools than neighborhood segregation among schools. However, because of technology, education can become more affordable, giving poorer kids the same advantages that richer kids now have. Because of technology, the classroom can be both local and global. "Imagine," Khan enthuses, assigning the One World Schoolhouse the ability to transcend national rivalries, "... students in Tehran tutoring students in Tel Aviv or students in Islamabad learning from a professor in New Delhi" (p. 252). Presumably, they would find a common language in which to communicate.

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Refreshingly, Khan is suspicious of the conviction that technology alone is the Super Fix of educational disrepair. Technology, he insists, enhances rather than dominates learning. Enlightened educators integrate it in "meaningful and imaginative ways" (p.122). So arguing, Khan preserves an honored role for teachers. They coach; they mentor; they inspire; they provide perspective. Both students and teachers benefit from "face time." (Reading Khan I must face up to some of the more egregious rhetoric common to current educational reform.) "Face time" happens after students have

used the Khan Academy introduction to mastery learning, and when it does, sweetness and strength flow. For “face time shared by teachers and students is one of the things that humanizes the classroom experience, that lets both teachers and students shine in their uniqueness” (p. 35).

Likeable though Khan can be, *The One World Schoolhouse* is also irritating. Written for a general audience, it indulges in slapdash generalizations about psychology and history. For example, the remarks about the early university, which did train poorer boys for good careers, are silly. “Early universities pursued esoteric topics for a handful of privileged people who’d done their early learning at home; most of these students were wealthy or connected enough that ‘work’ was almost a dirty word” (p. 75). Perhaps not surprisingly, he ignores the contemporary university as a source of the concepts that children should learn. Indeed, a disturbing feature of much writing about radical change in education is an apparent indifference to the wellsprings of discoveries, new questions, and fresh ideas, and primary among these wellsprings is the university. It is all very well to praise student-centered learning. It is all very well to deploy technology-enhanced methods and metrics in pursuit of it. It is all very well for young men and women who already possess intellectual and social capital to scoff about going to college. However, students need to be learning something. What is the content of Khan’s thousands of videos? If the subject at hand is the French Revolution, and if the concept at hand is “revolution” or “historical change,” the research universities provide our agile, informed experts for both.

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Even more irritating is the comparative narrowness of Khan’s chosen focus on students’ lives. The social and economic facts about the context of these lives are stubborn things. Khan is hardly socially obtuse. He mentions global “poverty, hopelessness, and unrest” (p. 221). His paragraphs about the Indian subcontinent are alert to child malnutrition, a weak infrastructure, and administrative laxness and corruption. His sincerity about “making a difference” for all children is palpable. He wants them to be kind, good, thriving, well-educated global citizens.

However, his compelling interest is in the schoolroom and not in the home, or neighborhood, or church, or school board that surrounds it. Crucially, a child can be passive at her desk because she is being brutally sexually abused at home, not because she is a victim of rote learning. As a result

of his focus, Khan’s descriptions and prescriptions can lack the force of other important books about reform that have a wider-angled lens. I think, for example, of Patricia Albjerg Graham’s *S.O.S. Sustain Our Schools*, published in 1992 but still relevant. It is blunt about the need for change. “Today the practices of the past are inadequate for the present and irrelevant for the future” (p. 17). Yet, she puts education and its remedies into a social landscape, “a deterioration in the lives of many children, exemplified by increased poverty, unstable families, and reckless consumerism” (p. 17).

My criticism will seem like carping if the Khan Academy leads diverse people of all ages, outside and inside of the formal classroom, to an education that is cognitively wide and deep; imaginatively creative and engaging; and morally resonant. The benign glories of the global schoolhouse itself cannot be assessed. They are too far in the future, too visionary, too sketchy, too blue sky. However, Khan seems eager to have his pedagogy robustly examined, even if his methods of assessment are but skimpily and loosely mentioned. Part of the problem of the assessment of Khan is similar to the problem of the assessment of any pedagogy that a provider delivers from his or her self-constructed platform to anyone who wants to download it. How does any objective observer insert him or herself into the process and measure what is really going on, using transparent criteria? Discern the efficacy of the lessons, the videos and problem sets and feedback mechanisms? Another part of the problem is that Khan promises, not only that people will learn, that they will master a concept, but that they will feel better about learning, happier and more self-confident. How does any objective observer measure individual character growth?

Khan seems to assume blithely, but not stupidly, that the popularity of his lessons, in several languages, is one important proof that people benefit from them cognitively and psychologically. He has tributes from his students. To suggest an analogy: if lots of people eat Cheerios, and some people write to the manufacturer and say that their children adore them, Cheerios must be nutritionally good for you. Khan does explicitly argue that his lessons have gotten extensive field-testing in the few years that the Khan Academy has existed. Through guesswork and experimentation, again mentioned rather than analyzed, he has come to believe that students have mastered a concept when they can “correctly solve ten consecutive problems on a given subject” (p. 138). He also notes some programs that have had a group using Khan techniques and a control group that did not. The test scores in the Khan group, he reports, increased significantly.

Measuring the Khan Academy critically will be more common if and when more existing classrooms collaborate with it in a systematic way. Assessors can get inside the process more easily. A straw in the winds of revolutionary change is in Idaho. In late February 2013, it announced a

pilot program involving 47 schools—charter, public, and private---that are to use Khan Academy materials. The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation is to give \$1.5 million to these schools, in part for assessment. Moreover, the Foundation is donating money to the Northwest Nazarene University to support this activity through its Center for Innovation and Learning, previously unknown to me. Located in Nampa, Idaho, Northwest Nazarene is a private, liberal arts college, associated with the Church of the Nazarene, which also offers a handful of master's programs and one doctorate, an Ed.D.

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We shall see what we shall see, and we had better look. Meanwhile, the Khan Academy charges on, and Sal Khan charismatically spreads his gospel from the multiple platforms of contemporary communications. Instructively, the subtitle of his book is “Education Reimagined,” far more Romantic and less technocratic than such favored, but less glamorous and dramatic slogans of great change as “reengineering.” Because this is contemporary education, the often cheesy amalgamation of commerce and branding is never far from seductive promises of revolutionary academic change. The Khan Academy has a website, of course, and on that site is an official on-line store. One can purchase a Khan Academy onesie for \$19.50, a Union Square Laptop Messenger bag for \$75.50. Learn more, buy more. Examining these linked imperatives of cultivating the mind and spending money, a primary feature of our “revolutionary” educational moment, calls for the moral and political talents of all of us.

## References

Graham, P.A. (1992). *S.O.S. Sustain Our Schools*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.