



NCTI 2008 Innovators Conference

Session Title The Power of Digital Learning
Names of Presenters Gordon Freedman, Barbara (Bobbi) Kurshan, Anne Murphy, Susan Patrick
Date Thursday, November 20, 2008

Summary Panelists discussed the exciting future of digital learning, which has been identified as one of the top ten breakthroughs predicted to transform life over the next 20 to 30 years. With movements toward open source curricula, expansion of blended learning environments, and backing from a new, federally-funded research center on information and digital technologies, this transformation will be anything but insignificant.

Gordon Freedman, Vice President, Education Strategy, [Blackboard, Inc.](#) (*Moderator*)

Gordon opened the session by expressing his excitement over the powerful potential of digital learning for revolutionizing education. He welcomed and introduced the distinguished panelists and described their areas of expertise. Gordon then turned the floor over to Susan Patrick.

Susan Patrick, President and CEO, [North American Council for Online Learning](#)

Susan provided an international perspective on what's happening in K-12 online learning. All over the world, online learning has increased educational opportunities for students. Among alternative energy, precision farming, and entertainment-on-demand, virtual education (or distance learning) has been identified as one of the top 10 breakthroughs predicted to transform life over the next 20 – 30 years. Susan identified the need for an innovative system that solves education's inequities, and described online learning as "a Trojan horse for education reform." As the research base expands, we are seeing that online learning expands options, improves teaching, and has results that are equal to or better than classroom-based instruction. The future of online learning certainly holds much promise for students studying at a distance, but Susan described its use in a blended learning environment as even more important. Blended learning, she concluded, will fundamentally redesign what we think is appropriate in education.

Barbara (Bobbi) Kurshan, Executive Director, [Curriki](#)

Bobbi's presentation outlined the idea and importance of building a digital crossroads between those who have knowledge and information and those who want to learn. We have many instructional materials, and all are packed with knowledge. But these traditional resources make knowledge proprietary; they aren't shared. Bobbi and the folks at Curriki (the first Internet destination for Open Source curricula) believe that we should be sharing knowledge widely, and at no cost. A site like Curriki, which allows users to create and improve content (not just consume it) makes for a more engaging education that is available to all. This "disruptive idea", lowers the cost of instructional materials, improves the dissemination of quality instruction, and facilitates the sharing of ideas.

Anne Murphy, Executive Director, [Digital Promise Project](#)



Anne Murphy, Larry Grossman, and others at the Digital Promise Project have worked long and hard for their recent success: in response to their proposed principles, Congress has established the National Center for Research in Advanced Information and Digital Technologies. Anne's presentation described the purpose of the center: to determine how we can transform America's education, from the cradle to the grave, through the development of revolutionary advanced information technologies. The Digital Promise Project, she explained, will continue to focus on research, design and testing, and the encouragement of widespread partnerships.

Discussion

- 1. Is the founding of the National Center for Research in Advanced Information and Digital Technologies somewhat like being at the birth of the NSF?*
Anne Murphy response: Yes – exactly!
- 2. Can you speak a bit more about the proprietary nature of course development?*
Bobbi Kurshan response: The course has never been the intellectual property of the university. I think the value of the university is the ability to create the infrastructure. The actual knowledge belongs to the person.
- 3. I'm trying to get online learning up and going. But professors complain that the information in their course is the professor's property. Faculty members are resistant to an open-source model. What should we do?*
Gordon Freedman: Interesting. I suppose it depends on the faculty. MIT, for example, is totally fine with putting their materials out there.
Bobbi Kurshan: Anything that I used the university's equipment to build was property of the university, actually. A lot of universities have said that anything built in a course online is considered theirs.
- 4. How are your courses delivered? Through course management systems? Are they open source? Are they accessible?*
Susan Patrick: The states that have virtual schools (32 states) all manage their program differently. We put out a paper on accessibility, and to be honest, it's a long answer. But every school must have an accessibility plan. As far as learning management, they are using everything – open source, proprietary – everything!
- 5. Comment: I recommend www.class.com. Go there and explore all of the courses available. They also serve up accessible courseware!*
Susan Patrick: There is a tremendous interest in not just the highly-motivated kid, but also in those who are less motivated or who are truly unable to focus in traditional high schools, as well as ELL students.
- 6. Comment: It would be great to have disabled folks help inform programs of how a course does and does not work for them. It's pretty grim for those with disabilities.*
All: Yes, indeed.
- 7. Is there any movement to help pre-service teachers teach online?*
Susan Patrick: Since we released [standards of quality for online teaching](#), we have been in contact with many more teacher-preparation programs.
[MITE \(Midwest Institute for Telecommuting Education\)](#) is a good example.
- 8. There has to be a pathway to research what is being used. Curriki is helpful because we can follow who is using it and to what end.*



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Anne Murphy: I think an important part of this is partnership. Individual people looking at individual problems don't solve them. We have research being done by individual universities and companies, but things have not come together. Education needs some unifying research effort.