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BOOK REVIEW: 'The One World Schoolhouse'

By: Andrew J. Coulson - December 11, 2012

THE ONE WORLD SCHOOLHOUSE: EDUCATION REIMAGINED

By Salman Khan

Twelve, \$26.99, 272 pages

In "The One World Schoolhouse," Salman Khan presents a simple thesis: We learn best when we learn actively and at our own pace, mastering each new skill before proceeding to the next. What sets Mr. Khan apart from most pedagogical theorists, besides the fact that he's actually right, is that he's giving his services away. His website, KhanAcademy.org, hosts thousands of instructional videos and interactive lessons. Millions of people around the world have used them and sing their praises.

Given his growing success, Mr. Khan's goal is suitably ambitious: "A free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere." But he seems to want to change the way the world learns without changing the way the world schools.

Mr. Khan's focus is inside the classroom on instructional practices and tools. He is largely silent on, and seems indifferent to, the ways schools are managed and how students choose or are assigned to them and the way teachers are trained and compensated. This narrowness of view is a handicap for a would-be world-changer, and surprising coming from as well-integrated a mind as Mr. Khan's.

He extols the interconnectedness of ideas and disciplines, having spent years working in the investment industry. It is hard to believe that Mr. Khan would not expect the economics of an education system to affect its performance. The evidence for such an interconnection litters the entire history of schooling, and Mr. Khan himself presents one piece of it.

"In a truly shocking 1989 study, it was concluded that between 1893 and 1979, 'instructional practice [in public schools] remained about the same' (and it really hasn't changed from 1979 to 2012 either)! ... Did no one notice how much the world was changing, and how much the educational needs of students were evolving as well?"

He does not add, but must be aware, that this methodological stagnation is unparalleled in the rest of the economy. The norm in human endeavors over the past two centuries has been innovation and productivity growth. Why has education been so uniquely forlorn, outpaced by the progress in other fields? On that question, Mr. Khan's intellectual curiosity is curiously absent.

What could explain his uncharacteristic indifference to such a pivotal question? One possibility is that he knows the answer but feels it would be counterproductive to acknowledge it — that it might ruffle too many feathers, turning potential allies against him. Another possibility arises from Mr. Khan’s own theory of learning. While he has clearly mastered pedagogy (and computer programming, and vast swaths of mathematics and the sciences), he may have gaps in his knowledge of education policy. These gaps, in turn, could be preventing him from reaching the “Aha!” realization that would make sense out of the seemingly incomprehensible history of schooling.

There are hints of such gaps. Mr. Khan claims that private school outcomes are essentially indistinguishable from those of public schools, and intimates that there is no important difference between the sectors. But scores of public versus private school studies have been undertaken over the past quarter century, and in the preponderance of the research there is a clear pattern of superior outcomes in the private sector. When the least-regulated, most market-like private school systems are compared to government school monopolies such as we have in the United States, the results overwhelmingly favor market education — by a ratio of 15 statistically significant findings to 1.

Mr. Khan’s discussion of private education also emphasizes elite prep schools charging \$30,000 or more per pupil. He does not mention that these make up only a tiny fraction of the private sector and that, on average, private schools spend substantially less than their government-run counterparts. In Arizona, for instance, total per-pupil spending is 50 percent higher in government schools. This is not 50 percent higher than tuition revenue but 50 percent higher than total private school spending.

Yet, the same Salman Khan who spent years painstakingly comparing the efficiency of businesses appears unaware of the stark difference in efficiency between the sectors in education. Nor does he take an interest in the more surprising fact that the stagnation and productivity collapse of public schooling can also be seen, to a lesser extent, in the private K-12 education sector. U.S. private elementary and secondary schooling only looks good compared to its state-run counterpart. Compared to the progress enjoyed in other fields, it, too, appears retrograde.

The realization that ties all these facts together is that educators are human beings just like the rest of us, and respond in the same way to the constraints and incentives of the system in which they work. When efficiency and excellence are rewarded, they thrive. When stagnation and falling productivity are not penalized, they spread. When the risks of innovation and failure are not outweighed by some greater compensation, they are seldom undertaken.

Of course the government school monopoly became sclerotic and inefficient — that is the normal outcome for monopolies. The overwhelmingly nonprofit private education sector failed to take risks and innovate at the same pace as for-profit industries — it lacked the compensating lure of profits.

Mr. Khan sometimes seems close to connecting these dots. At one point he observes, “Lacking some clear and present urgency to leave the comfort zone ... [educators concluded,] why bother?” Precisely. As the president of his class at Harvard Business School, Mr. Khan knows what provides the “clear and present urgency” in the rest of the economy: the combination of competition, consumer choice and the profit-loss system.

Mr. Khan's services are so good and so readily available that they may disrupt the status quo monopoly whether or not he recognizes it as the problem. Without market freedoms and incentives, such a disruption may simply raise the plateau at which the education sector stagnates. The only way for teaching and learning to keep pace with the progress happening all around us is to invite education back into the free-enterprise system that has driven that progress. Humanity deserves a vision of the educational future that looks ever upward.