

Creating A Classroom For The World by Gina Murdock

Interview BY Gina Murdock

Gina Murdock: Can you give us a snapshot of where Khan Academy is now and where you see yourself if five years?

Sal Khan: In this past month, Khan Academy has had 10 million unique viewers to the site and 10 million registered users; those numbers just happen to be the same. What people get at the site is a large collection of videos, primarily focused on math and science, but we actually have a large collection of art history videos. Actually, it's the largest collection of art history videos. We have partnerships with folks like the Met and the Getty. We also have an interactive exercise platform, which is primarily focused on math right now, where students can go, learners of any age really, can go and take a practice test. It starts to understand what the student knows and doesn't know. It has game mechanics to motivate someone to keep learning the math. You can start with basic arithmetic and really go all the way through college level calculus.

We're also, this last few months and going forward for the foreseeable future, focusing on internationalization. We just launched a fully Spanish Khan Academy, es.khanacademy.org. We're going to launch a Brazilian/Portuguese Khan Academy, a Turkish Khan Academy, a French Khan Academy and on and on.

The third dimension is, not only are we making a lot of our own content, but we're partnering with other folks, like the Getty and MOMA to help use our platform for their content.

GM: What do you see as the potential for online learning to the benefit of society in general?

SK: There are a couple of things where we can fit in. One is, if a student has nothing or next to nothing and they do get access to something like this, (it does require internet access and a computer) we might be able to take them pretty far. Depending on where they are and what level they are starting at, we can allow them to learn at their own pace, we can provide them with feedback, and provide them with incentives to really forward their learning and one day prove their learning so they can interface with society and the economy.

The other place, which is actually the primary use of Khan Academy right now, is in math

and science. People keep getting pushed forward in school, but start accumulating gaps in their knowledge. They didn't fully understand exponents or they didn't fully understand basic algebra, so when they are in calculus, those gaps start hurting them. For many of our users, Khan Academy has become a safety net. So when they get to college level physics and they don't understand what is going on, they come to us, and they can review the basic concepts.

In terms of our ideal use case and where we hope it goes in future years, Khan Academy as a virtual tool can be used to supercharge the physical classroom. I stress that because a lot of people think that virtual is trying to replace the physical classroom and that is not what we're trying to do. We think that the physical is super important and should always be the center of your education, but we can use virtual to allow physical to, for lack of a better term, blossom. Right now, physical classrooms are focused on lecture and focused on all of the students going at the same pace. We imagine experiences where students learn at their own pace through Khan Academy, master concepts, and teachers get feedback and data on where their students are. It then allows the teachers to make class-time more about conversations, about projects, about peer-to-peer learning.

GM: It seems so obvious that in the ten years that you have been doing this that there is no doubt that it has uplifted humanity. Can you give us a poignant example of someone who has been affected by using your videos?

SK: I received a testimonial video from this young girl. I used to joke that someday this would be used in Mongolia and it turns out that she was from Mongolia. She talked about how Khan Academy had helped her. Then I read the e-mail and it turns out that this group of engineers from San Francisco were going out to Mongolia and setting up computer labs in orphanages and she was one of the orphans. That in itself was mind-blowing. Here was this fifteen-year-old Mongolian girl in an orphanage using Khan Academy with her classmates, but now she is seventeen and she is one of the top creators of content in the Mongolian language.

Also, just a few weeks ago, there was a group of students from Princeton who were touring Silicon Valley and 20-30 of them came to our office to chat with me. One student said, "Before I ask my question, I just want you to know that I had dropped out of high school twice when I was a freshman. School didn't gel with me. Then I found Khan Academy and it allowed me to re-engage with a lot of the stuff that used to frustrate me. I went back to school and learned two years of math in two months. I went back and not only caught up, but I ended up graduating as valedictorian, got into Princeton, where I am a computer science major, and I just applied for an internship at Khan Academy." When you hear stories like that - a kid who dropped out of high school twice and is now a junior at Princeton as a computer science major - I mean, just that one story alone makes it worthwhile.

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