

Reconsidering Our Basic Assumptions In a Global Context

Jim Stewart

The Director of Distance Education and the Center for Lifelong Learning at Western Seminary,
Portland, Oregon, USA

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I love world maps. From my earliest memories I have enjoyed purchasing atlases and maps, large and small, wherever I might find them. Most have been acquired from visits to community garage sales or book fairs. As a student my budget was greatly limited and now...well, I guess am just cheap. It really doesn't matter to me if maps are out of date. I simply enjoy the care with which they are drawn, and the range of nationalities and cultures their many colors represent. Over time I have found them to be a testament to the inexorable march of history as in their pages new countries emerge full of hope and promise, and old empires age and die.

My favorite view of the earth as a boy, and one that was quite common in years past, was the standard Mercator projection which dates, in a variety of forms, from 1569. You may know the particular map I mean...dead center on the page was the United States with Canada prominently positioned above it. That view of the world dominated our classrooms and set the globe in place as I then felt it should be, in a way that made me comfortable. Did anyone really care that the Asian continent was split in two, as if separated by two great oceans? And poor India! That map-challenged nation sometimes flowed on and off the edge of the page as if only an afterthought, like a note being written around the edge of a too-small piece of paper. But, if any of this actually bothered anyone I reasoned, surely someone would have complained.

Forty years later the Mercator projection is still popular for cartographers, but the common orientation clearly has changed. Today, it is unlikely that you will find a map that presents the United States at the center of our world. Appropriately, and sensitively, each continent and nation now finds its proper place on the map, whole and uninterrupted.

If only it were that easy to re-center our attitudes and assumptions concerning the world in which we live.

In recent conversations concerning technology trends, I have been troubled by the assumptions that many seem to make concerning America's role in the development and use of technologies in the global marketplace. Underlying much of discussion is the sense that our American experience is the standard by which all technological advancement is measured.

For example, in my specific area of distance education, the expressed assumption of many seems to be that the explosion of distance education globally is, and indeed should be, being driven by American academia. Similarly, the barometer of its effective use is too-often thought to be how, when and where our larger, brand-name schools are choosing to use these new resources. While higher education in the United States has a well-earned reputation for excellence, any attitude

that reflects America's academic supremacy in distance education is myopic, self-centered and, frankly, contrary-to-fact.

Mainstream academia in the United States comes relatively late to the distance education table. Issues of quality and accreditation that continue to challenge our traditional structures have been resolved and programs implemented in other parts of the world to great effect. For example, Athabasca University, Canada's largest provider of distance education programs has served the needs of hundreds of thousands of students since 1970, long before distance education was, if not embraced, then at least acknowledged to exist by much of American academia. The Distance Education and Training Council, a major accreditor of non-traditional programs in the U.S. was established in 1926, and yet, 80 years later, still struggles for recognition and acceptance by the mainstream educational establishment.

Government involvement and direction in distance education in Canada is part of a national response to population and geographical realities. To illustrate, the new territory of Nunavut is the size of Alaska and California combined with a population of only 29,300. Canada's entire population of approximately 32,571,000 is less than that of California, even though Canada is the second largest nation geographically in the world. Driven by need, the effective use of distance education has been a critical element of Canada's educational planning for decades.

These same concerns of geographical distance and population density are in play in other nations such as Russia and Australia. And a related concern is also at work in heavily populated nations such as India and China. In these nations, it is not geography that dominates. Instead, it is the cost of developing an educational infrastructure sufficient to support their governments' commitment to economic development through a huge and highly-trained workforce. This same concern for the enormous costs required to create a traditional brick-and-mortar infrastructure adequate for an exploding growing enrollment was the driving force behind the establishment of the Western Governors University in the United States.

Within our own borders, the rapid rise of the for-profit educational institution also evidences a larger reality: The endemic lack of flexibility of traditional education. One expert estimates that 1 of 12 university students now attends a for-profit institution. While we may like to stress the profit motive as a driving element, we must also consider:

1. Several of the major for-profit schools started as part of existing public educational systems, but were denied the ability to innovate and to reset the academic clock for their students.
2. Many for-profit schools function, in reality, as degree-granting corporate training programs. While the largest non-traditional educational systems globally are found within the multi-national corporate world, they cannot (yet) offer what remains the primary evaluative currency of education attainment, full degree programs.

We in the United States do indeed have much to be proud of academically. But we also have much to learn. Until then, let's acknowledge that we are not the arbiter of all things educational.

And While I Am At It...

Other assumptions disturb me as well. For instance, consider these statements:

1. The United States leads the world in broadband implementation. This one frequently arises in conversations. When discussing the use of the Internet to serve the training needs of students internationally, specifically in applications such as media streaming, I often hear something patronizing along the lines of “You know we can’t do that...not everyone has broadband access as we have.”

To that statement I actually agree. Not *everyone* has broadband access as we have, but *many* do. The United States has the largest raw number of broadband users, but we certainly do not enjoy the highest rate of implementation as a percentage of population. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the following is true:

- Eleven other nations lead the United States in subscribers as a percentage of population.
- Canada leads all G7 countries in broadband penetration
- Korea leads the world in homes and business switching from DSL and Cable to fiber connections for increased bandwidth. (This results in a type of “broadband plus” that significantly increases upload and download speeds.)
- In Japan, fiber connections alone outnumber the total number of broadband subscribers in 21 of the 30 OECD countries

Even more, the OECD does not include a number of important nations who will greatly influence the future development of online-delivered resources. Absent among them: China and India.

According to the DSL Forum, and reported by the British Broadcast Corporation, China now leads the world in DSL implementation and is expected to reach 20 millions subscribers by the end of 2006. Still, it lags far behind Korea where 29% of all phone lines carry broadband. China, with its population of 1.3 billion, has a very small percentage of their population able to access broadband, but the numbers and the potential for education based upon the total population – even with continuing lower rates of broadband implementation – are staggering.

In summary, it is certainly true that the United States is *a* leader in broadband usage, but it is not true that we are *the* leader. If we cannot use broadband to bring educational services to every part of the world, thanks to the OECD, I can name at least 11 other countries where we can begin.

2. The United States drives the global technology marketplace.

Clearly this is presently true. Our \$10 trillion economy is easily twice that of Japan, our closest competitor, and benefits enormously from the export of technologies world-wide. Generally, our technologies represent the existing gold standard. A study by the online magazine “Brandchannel”, for example, asserts that the premier technology brand world-wide this year is America’s Apple, which benefited from the popularity of the iPod product line to replace Google at number one. Though not listed in the survey, Microsoft is surely not far behind with the dominance of its Windows operating system.

No one can doubt the enormous impact that our software and computer technologies, both at the desktop and in industry, have had in the evolution of the global economy. But we must surely avoid, any implication in our conversation that the United States will continue to drive the technology marketplace. That, I suggest, is terribly short-sighted.

A report from 2003 placed the United States in first place among the world's economies with China in sixth place with just over \$1 trillion dollars of GDP. Since that report China has grown from sixth place to tie the United Kingdom for fourth. At its current 10% per year rate of growth, some have suggested that China's economy will be second only the United States...but only marginally ...by 2030. And it is important to note that the current rate of growth has not resulted simply from the opening of lower-cost Chinese production resources for other nations to produce goods, nor are future projections simply extending that trend. Rather, growth is increasingly by a focused effort to establish a technology development sector within the nation's economy to fuel future growth.

And it is no coincidence that India has become the symbol of American service jobs being lost to overseas providers. Recently, for example, Dell Computers announced the opening of a 1500-person support call center in Mohali, its third such facility in India. So significant has this movement become that for some of us it is almost a surprise when our provider's help desk representative does not speak with an Indian accent.

With its population of more than 1.1 billion, India has been investing in its technology for decades, and like China graduates more engineers from its universities than does the United States. The availability of a highly trained workforce and still-repressed wages have resulted in international demand so great that the National Association of Software and Services Companies is concerned that there will be a shortfall of 235,000 trained professionals in India to support growth. Some see a problem developing because of double-digit wage increases in India that could threaten its new global technology role. More likely, in my opinion, is the likelihood that India will move from its current technology support role to a much higher-profile technology leader.

As China grows, and as its sub-continent neighbor India grows, will America still lead technologically? I don't know, but if it does it certainly won't be by default. I am convinced that our strategic thinking, planning, decision making and actions in the future must take on a global awareness and seek cooperation rather than accepting the more comfortable, but increasingly false position of unilateral development and action.

Enough for now. In case it has been lost, my point is simply this: From time to time, each of us must take time to re-evaluate our basic assumptions. As Americans living in an incredibly productive and creative society, we must strive always to avoid a narrow, parochial view of our world, a world in which all things American dominate. In reality, that world is an illusion; it no longer exists. We must open our thinking to allow for and embrace the inevitable ebb and flow of global change.