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"Offers seemingly radical but actually feasible ideas with the potential to change the world."
—Jared Diamond

THIS WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING
IDEAS THAT WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE
EDITED BY JOHN Brockman
INTRODUCTION BY JANET MALCOLM
INEXPENSIVE CUSTOMIZABLE INTERACTIVE E-TEXTS FOR WORLDWIDE USE

DAVID G. MYERS

DAVID G. MYERS is a social psychologist at Hope College, Holland, Michigan, and the author of A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God Is Good and Faith Isn’t Evil.

My university colleagues in southern Africa have often expressed their wish for teaching materials that, for them, would change everything: If only there were a way for their students, who could not afford even greatly discounted Euro-American textbooks, to have access to low-cost, culturally relevant, state-of-the-art textbooks. For students in Africa (and elsewhere around the globe), this utopian world may, in the next decade, become the real world, thanks to the following:

- Interactive textbooks: Various publishers are developing Web-based interactive e-books with links to tutorials, simulations, quizzes, animations, virtual labs, discussion boards, and video clips. (These are not yesterday’s e-textbooks.)
- Customizability: Instructors and regional instructor networks will be able to rearrange the content, delete unwanted material, and add (or link to) materials pertinent to their students’ worlds and their own course goals.
• Affordability: In the developed world, students will pay for course access. With no hard-copy book production or shipping and no used books, publishers will stay afloat with a much smaller fee paid by many more students, or via a site license. For courses in economically impoverished regions, benevolent publishers could make access available for very low cost per student.
• Student accountability: Instructors will track their students’ engagement in advance of class sessions, thus freeing more class time for discussion.
• Expanding broadband access: Thanks partly to a joint foundation initiative by Rockefeller, Carnegie, Ford, and others, information technologies and the Internet are coming to African universities. As yet, access is limited and expensive, but with increased bandwidth and the prospect of inexpensive wireless personal reading devices, that may change.

This is not pie in the sky. African educators are eager to explore the effectiveness of the new interactive content when it becomes available to their students. The hope is that it will combine the strengths of existing texts, which are comprehensive, expertly reviewed, painstakingly edited, and attractively packaged, and be supported with teaching aids at reduced cost and perhaps with locally adapted illustrations and content. By making the same information available to rich and poor students at rich and poor schools in rich and poor countries, e-texts are egalitarian. They flatten the world. And as James Madison noted in 1825, “The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.”