

## ***Diabologic: Back to School***

by Frank Dolinar

The Internet is in the process of causing the most fundamental transformation in education since the invention of movable type and the Gutenberg press.

In 1440, German inventor Johannes Gutenberg was 40. He invented a printing process that made it possible to mass produce books and thereby make books available to the common man. The process continued to be the principal means of printing until the late 20th century.

Since the mid-1980s, electronic document creation has been displacing printing presses. The first desktop publishing program “Aldus Pagemaker” (now Adobe PageMaker) was created by Paul Brainard and Aldus Corporation (named after the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian printer Aldus Manutius) and released in July, 1985, for the "Macintosh" and in December, 1986, for the "IBM PC".

In the 1990s, Tim Berners-Lee unleashed the World Wide Web on a (mostly) unsuspecting planet.

Barely more than a decade ago, the Internet and the Web exploded into our consciousness, our businesses, and now into our homes. Every week, more businesses and individuals discard their dial-up access to the Internet (as I did a year ago) and replace it with broadband (high-speed) connections.

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, in an article published May 28, 2006, “Adoption of high-speed Internet at home grew twice as fast in the year prior to March 2006 than in the same time frame from 2004 to 2005. Middle-income Americans accounted for much of the increase, along with African Americans and new Internet users coming online with broadband at home. At the end of March 2006, 42% of Americans had high-speed at home, up from 30% in March 2005, or a 40% increase. And 48 million Americans -- mostly those with high-speed at home -- have posted content to the Internet.” ([http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/184/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/184/report_display.asp)) [Support for the nonprofit Pew Internet Project ([www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org)) is provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts.]

In September of 2006, we’re watching as the Internet, the Web, our computers, PDAs, cellphones, and various forms of “pod” accessories make the gathering of information easy – too easy. We find ourselves in a sea of information looking for a way to navigate.

What does this have to do with education? The short answer is “Distance Learning” -- educational materials available via the Web.

The information technologies that have become such an integral part of the fabric of our lives make it possible for us to access seminars (aka “webinars”), tutorials, course materials, formal papers, scholastic and technical journals, and other resources of all kinds, on any subject, and much of it is free. Much of the content is high-resolution graphics, multi-channel sound, and real-time video, which would be difficult or impossible to deliver without broadband connections to the Internet.

The popularity of these freebies has not been lost on numerous educational institutions (including Michigan State University) that are now offering distance learning courses for credit. A look at distance learning options at the Guide to Online Schools (<http://www.guidetoonlineschools.com/>) is instructive, but it is deceptive. These are schools that offer the majority of their schooling online.

Many major universities, world wide, are engaged in a fierce competition to offer distance learning courses. The prize for these universities will be a population of students drawn to courses derived from world-class research, presented by capable teachers, and organized to enhance the learning process.

These distance learners will drive and become the beneficiaries of an educational buyer’s market.

Students will be able to: determine what they want to study, when, where, and in what form; define an educational goal and devise their own curriculum; aggregate coursework that best fits their individual needs, from multiple universities; and do this through the college or university of their choice.

The expert teachers who deliver these courses will, not surprisingly, become wealthy in the process.

This quickly evolving process will permeate the academic culture at all levels and permanently change the acquisition of education.

The institution known as a school will change beyond recognition.

It is happening now.

Every individual and institution that can adapt will be a winner.