

Transcription for

THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

# INSIDE HIGHER ED

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LOOKING BACK ON DIY AND AHEAD WITH ANYA KAMENETZ  
DOUG LEDERMAN

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(MUSIC PLAYS)

DOUG LEDERMAN:

In 2010, a book called *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* envisioned a wholesale shift in how people learned more than a decade later. How has that panned out? Hello, and welcome to *The Key*, Inside Higher Ed's news analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed. Welcome back for another episode of this podcast aimed at exploring how higher education is changing and the impact on students and institutions. This week's episode features my conversation with Anya Kamenetz, who in 2010 tapped into an emerging set of issues around student debt, rapid technological change and political upheaval to lay out a portrait of a world in which individuals could learn when and how they wanted, and be far less dependent on instructors, institutions, and the business model that underpins higher education. I brought the idea of do-it-yourself learning up in a recent conversation I was having about whether the pandemic had changed student expectations about learning, and I thought it might be interesting to talk to Anya about how the current landscape looks to her and what she got right and wrong 12 years ago.

We'll hear that conversation in a minute. But first, here's a word from Kaplan, the sponsor of this week's episode.

SPEAKER:

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

Here's my conversation with Anya Kamenetz, longtime education correspondent with National Public Radio and author of the recently released *The Stolen Year* about pandemic-era learning. Anya, welcome to *The Key* and thanks for being here.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

Thanks for having me, Doug.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

You have done a lot of other things since publishing *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* back in, I think it was 2010. But take us back to that past part of your life and say a bit about the book, why you wrote it and its key themes and then we can go from there.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

Sure. I had published a book called *Generation Debt* and that was addressing the millennial generation at the time, how they were grappling with student debt, as well as other economic headwinds. And that book sent me all over the country to college campuses where I was supposed to talk to students. But I also ended up listening to students a lot and hearing about their struggles in higher education, not only to pay for it, but also to find education that was relevant and that actually got, got them set for their futures, the way that they hoped it would. And I happened to have a job at the same time that was at a tech magazine *Fast Company*. I was starting to pay more attention to broadband and video and mobile

and how many people thought the internet might transform learning. And so, DIY U was a book that talked about the cost, quality and access challenges of higher education and whether new models, new innovative formats, possibly deconstructing the old model of the university, which we know has been around for upwards of 1,000 years.

And recombining those elements with the assistance of a little bit of internet magic could that in fact break the monopoly of higher education on credentials and deliver people what they seem to want, which was education that was affordable, but also relevant and accessible to people no matter where they were in the world or in their lives.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Since it's the start of the title, just give a quick sense of the DIY piece of it and what that meant 'cause that obviously captured a lot of attention and explain sort of just that little piece of it 'cause I think that's important to our conversation today.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

Yeah, so DIY U stood for Do It Yourself University. And I think people are most familiar with DIY in the sense of like home repairs which continues to be a super robust category on YouTube and for self-knowledge because that notion of kind of practical hands-on fit with an ideology that was emerging a punk rock application, a punk ideals to education, and that actually merged with some very deep anarchists ideas. So, you know, there are people for a long time who have said communities should be the ones who serve their own needs and learning is absolutely one of those needs. So, if you fast forward, for example, to occupy Wall Street, which happened one year after DIY was published, there were libraries at Occupy Wall Street, there were lectures at Occupy Wall Street. Part of the envisioning of kind of a self-organized utopian society includes education.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Lots of directions to go in from there, but one of the things that was interesting to me and is that you talked about the sort of stranglehold on credentials that higher education had and be interested in your thoughts on the extent to which it still has that. The DIY philosophy sort of got embraced to be this idea that people could just kind of patch together a bunch of stuff and maybe there would be a diminution in the emphasis on credentials. It was that a misreading. Did you then, and I'm curious how you think about it now, continue to believe that credentialing would be important, just that people would be able to more or less create their own, or that there would be more in different ways to combine things into something that would qualify as credential.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

So, the entire ethos of the book was descriptive, not prescriptive. I was describing a set of tensions that were pushing the higher education establishment in a number of different directions. And I believed that I was imagining higher education from the point of view of students, which I found very lacking in the conversation about higher education. The conversation about higher education is dominated by other stakeholders, it's dominated by professors, donors, alumni and administrators, and sometimes state lawmakers. It's rare that students really get the voice. And so, really my fundamental reimagining of this was what if universities serve students' interests? What would they look like? Then I did call out case studies of individuals. I'm thinking of, you know, people that did their own do-it-yourself master's degrees or started their own do-it-yourself MFA programs and just said, you know, we have the tools, we have the knowledge, why not just do this? I saw this as inspirational.

I didn't necessarily see, think that in any case that they would become the norm. One of the most gratifying things about this book and stands out from all the other books that I've written in that, you know, it might have been launched on a smaller platform than some of my other books, but people who picked it up were really inspired and there were a number of people who came to me and said, I actually started something, I started an institution or organization because of the principles that you set forth in this book.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Some actors don't go back and re-re-watch their movies. I don't know whether you go back and re-read your books, but how has the landscape changed since then to the extent that you, whether you laid it out or not, whether you had a sense of where you thought things should go, how much have they gone in that direction? I just, I'm curious how you assess the current landscape from where you were back in 2010.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

Top-level, I feel like I got a lot of things right, but where I was really missing is in a stronger power analysis. So, thinking about who are the stakeholders in this field that are gonna hold on to their advantages and really try to oppose what comes next. And just sort of in some ways, I mean, I, I talk a lot in the book about the inherent conservatism of universities. Universities are older than nations, you know, the universities in our country are, many of them are older than the country. So, they know how to hold on. That's something that they really know how to do. I had an opportunity last spring to speak at the 20th anniversary of MIT OpenCourseWare. And so, that was a chance for me to kind of review things we got right, things we got wrong and things we never saw coming. One of the dangers that happens with the technology or an innovation is once it becomes mainstreamed, it effectively, effectively disappears and people stop being excited about it. But the idea now, I mean it is completely taken for granted by every child, every teenager, every adult that they can learn about anything they wanna learn about.

And that's pretty major, it's a major shift in human history, right? Period. And that, and that happened because of video broadband and social media and because of the development of the practices of learning online. It doesn't mean that everybody can learn everything. Just because anybody can learn anything, doesn't mean everybody can learn everything. And the parts that are missing with that are really tracking the existing inequities in society, which if anything, have gotten worse in the last decade. When we think about alternative paths, I think accreditation turned out to be incredibly stubborn and conservative and I haven't seen alternative credentials gain the kind of awareness that would allow, enable them to go up against the old like BA or AA and really match them. It doesn't mean it's never gonna happen, but it's been, you know, it's been a lot of failed attempts.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Have you seen lots of intentional pushback or attempts to slow things down by traditional institutions and accreditors that have impeded the progress you hoped you might see? Or is it more just an overall slow pace of change?

ANYA KAMENETZ:

I'm not sure that it requires, you know, some kind of conspiracy theory. I mean, I think there's incumbents, the incumbents have advantages, they have power. Everybody in society who has any power has benefited from the current system as well.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

True.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

And one of the things I pointed out about universities in, in DIY U is we have a technocratic society, very technocratic society. People who make decisions are experts. And the definition of expertise is someone who spent a lot of time in a university, almost across the board. Business world has a little bit more openness and there are people who are even anti expertise in some ways. There's just a lot of people invested in the current system. It doesn't require universities to dig in their heels or go, you know, spread rumors or lie or undermine upstarts. One of the other areas that I feel like was a path that really disappeared in the woods as far as the development of, of innovation in higher ed was the open web, the origins of DIY U, part of them had to do with Creative Commons licensing and open internet and people owning their own domains. And we've lived through a decade of enclosure of the internet where now most of our communications are owned by a handful of companies, right?

There's been an incredible amount of concentration of resources. And so, the internet is not the free zone that it was if it ever was, but certainly not at the turn of the century. The scope for a free zone where learning can be rewarded for its own sake has really narrowed for commercial reasons. (MUSIC PLAYS)

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

Am I right in thinking that the opposite of a world in which learning is rewarded for its own sake is one in which most of the focus is on credentials of some sort? And the question really is whether we continue to have most of the credentials sort of owned and delivered by traditional providers or whether there are a lot more alternative providers and which credentials have value.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

I would flip the script on this a little bit 'cause when you think about the fact that people have 50-year careers, 95% of learning that you do might be outside of the 16 years that you spend in formal education. And most of that learning is alternative. So, sometimes people go back and get continuing education credits, sometimes they get additional degrees and also they do a heck of a lot of other stuff. They do, you know, employer-based training, they do on their own learning, they do brushing up on their skills, they do reading journals. And so, this is, we all carry these portfolios and I think that the credential is a necessary but not sufficient part of it. And I think that this is, it's actually really interesting. I mean, you can, this is a commonplace observation in the evolution of media, right? New forms of media rarely get rid of the old, the Telegraph is almost the only example of a form of mass communication that has disappeared. We still have radio, we still have movies, right?

Still a television, even broadcast TV. And so, it's tends to be additive. And I think that's very true of learning as well. I think there are, there's a huge proliferation, but that's never going to completely bury the (UNKNOWN).

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I'm particularly focused given the debt conversation we had earlier and Inside Higher Ed's main audience on the learning that happens in pursuit of a job or career or some kind of professional advancement as opposed to learning that we hopefully all do for growth in other things. In that realm, particularly, how far have we gone in the direction of the broad vision that you laid out there? And what are the necessary or helpful things that can happen that could push that along, given where we are today?

ANYA KAMENETZ:

There's definitely been progress in terms of options and in terms of the level of knowledge that's available to people, openly available to people. But there has not been progress in terms of access. I mean, we just haven't seen a huge improvement in equity, in attainment of education and the needs only grown. And in fact, the pandemic's just helped a huge setback to that particular problem, especially among community college students, especially among first-generation students. We now have new, I was just reading on your site about the terrible persistence statistics for the COVID generation boys in particular opting out of college. So, innovation only matters if it solves social real problems for real people. And we're not doing that because we're not setting policies that ensure that. I think Biden's student loan forgiveness acts as a one-time bomb for the racial wealth gap. And that's a good thing. But I don't know what the long-term impact is going to be on these issues on college tuition or college access.

I don't see the direct line from one to the other.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Some of the vision of alternative credentials. And we've certainly seen some, we see some really interesting experiments out there of credentialing more on the training side of things than in the liberal arts education side of the education and training ecosystem that are specifically aimed at closing that access gap. Places that are doing training very specifically at a no or low cost, et cetera. But so, but these are small, these are tiny. You're right that the vision of true alternative credentials only really is delivering if it is expanding that access, even if somehow the core system doesn't figure out how to be more equitable. You'd like to think that there are, would be other pathways developing.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

I mean, you're in these circles in these conversations, Doug, like are people freaking out about the missing students?

DOUG LEDERMAN:

There is both selfish interest on the part of institutional leaders, which is understandable given what their jobs are and what they're responsible for. The better of them are also deeply, deeply concerned about the social impact and the societal impact and worrying. And I think I can separate their, their selfish concerns from their better ones, maybe about somebody making a really short-term choice for an \$18 an hour job with a \$250 signing bonus that may end up in a layoff after the holidays. So, I think there is definitely concern about potentially sort of short-term decision-making that may not serve people in the long term. And I think there's absolutely widespread concern that what seemed to have been limited, but modest progress on access pre-pandemic has been, as you said, not just stopped, but reversed. And I think there's a lot of concern out there. I think there's pretty widespread concern. If you were to revisit these issues today, how different would your focus be? And how do you think you'd come at the same set of issues?

Do you think pretty similarly?

ANYA KAMENETZ:

Huh, that's such an interesting question. I mean, my personal education on equity has only grown as I think more about the perspective-taking that, you know, I may not have had as a younger writer. So, so that's one aspect of it. I think that the awareness of the social and emotional aspects of learning has grown as well. So, we all learned during the pandemic that all kinds of education can be delivered online, but we also learned the limitations of online learning, particularly for relationship building and the corollary there with a loss of motivation and staying committed to a goal. I think one dynamic that's been underexplored that's turned up in my reporting is that teenagers all over the country were sent home from high school, but they were allowed to work in essential jobs. And the teenagers that I met drew their social lives and their sense of purpose and meaning from those paid jobs. And that is part of what made it hard to go back and part of what made college fade into the background for those who were leaving high school.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That's interesting. I know you're reporting at NPR and elsewhere in recent years has, and especially during the pandemic, you saw, you quoted widely and reporting widely on learning disruption and some of the impacts of online learning. And you were obviously somebody who felt pretty strongly about the role of technology potentially in expanding access to education. Has what you've seen through the pandemic altered your sense of the role technology might play or just what we look to it to do?

ANYA KAMENETZ:

I would say that it's sharpened my sense of both the affordances of technology as well as its limitations, right? So, first of all, it'll be very unfair to compare this sort of manic panic to pivot to remote to what we like to do when we can do online learning in optimal conditions and environment. And it was in the middle of a pandemic and people were socially isolated. So, one of the things I've often said is, you know, there's no such thing as a remote learner. Learners are always located in a place. And the place that they're located in is very important to their success, whether that's a friends and family that they're taking care of, the people that give them their purpose, their why, or if they're on the job and they're learning for that job. I mean, it can be very, the most successful, determined, motivated online learners have a very strong reason to do what they're doing in their immediate environment.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Alright. And that wasn't the vast majority of remote learners during the pandemic. They were in their situation, not by choice and not happy about it.

ANYA KAMENETZ:

And the difference between people that do something by choice and people that are forced into it's vast no matter what you're looking at. But on the other hand, we had a lot of people change the way they do their work pretty much overnight. And people that had been very reluctant to do that in the higher ed world suddenly discovered that it was just fine.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That was on your common its author of 2010s,

DIY U:

Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education and 2022s, The Stolen Year: How COVID Changed Children's Lives, and Where We Go Now. Like a lot of books that envision significant transformation or disruption in higher education, DIY U probably overstated the extent and particularly the pace of change. It's certainly true that we all have many more avenues by which we can learn at our own pace and with less dependence on others. But it's also a reality that we remain deeply dependent on others to make sense of that learning to document it, to tie it together into something that an employer might recognize. I still think we're on the long path that Anya envisioned in DIY U toward a much more diffuse learning ecosystem in which there are many more forms of learning that employers and others value and a lot more credentials that learners can benefit from, but will continue to need. And I think want a way to make sense of all that learning and a true alternative approach to doing that is gonna take a lot longer than a decade to emerge, I suspect.

That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman. And until next week, stay well and stay safe. (MUSIC PLAYS)