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High-flying edutech platform

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Smart Sparrow began as a research group at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and is now a global leader in online education with a focus on adaptive and personalised learning technology. More than 500 institutions worldwide currently use the platform.

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As a PhD student at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), and now with his own company, Dror Ben-Naim created a next generation courseware platform that gives educators the ability to create innovative digital learning experiences.

Smart Sparrow – his company – provides interactive and authentic simulations and uses rules-based logic, set by the instructor, to adapt learning to an individual student's needs.

“We built technology that makes online education great,” Ben-Naim says from his San Francisco office. “Our software makes it easier and more cost effective to create digital learning experiences. Instead of just posting content online, the digital learning experience becomes more personalised, more intelligent, more adaptive.”

Australian university helped launch the company

Ben-Naim's motivation for improving online learning came from personal experience. As a student at UNSW a decade ago, he says the online component of the course was a video. He knew it could be improved – vastly.

“I knew a thing or two about computers and I figured we could do something better than just putting reading material on the screen,” he explains.

“I was in science and built a virtual laboratory where you could do the experiments on the computer. It was interactive and 3D and pretty and it was also ‘intelligent’ – as if it was a lab tutor helping you. It got me motivated to try and figure out how we can use technology to really improve learning.”

That project became the Adaptive eLearning Research Group at UNSW's School of Computer Science and Engineering and, eventually in 2011, Smart Sparrow. The company's success is a story of innovative university research evolving into a multinational business. Today, more than 500 institutions worldwide use the Smart Sparrow platform to create adaptive courseware.

“Smart Sparrow is not just technology coming from Australia – it is also a team of people from a good university succeeding,” Ben-Naim says. “UNSW gave us a grant to implement our ideas and impact real courses.”

Adaptive learning and technology explained

Ten years and US\$16 million in investment later, Ben-Naim says the challenge is not convincing people Smart Sparrow's technology is a good idea – it is getting educational organisations to change the way they teach and students learn.

“We impact education and we want to make education better,” he says. “We think it is important.”

How does adaptive learning work? According to Ben-Naim, the Smart Sparrow model is similar to having a private tutor.

“What makes a private tutor good?” he asks. “A private tutor can adapt to you. Also, when you go to a private tutor, you are not getting a lecture, you are not reading a book. You are typically doing problems and typically getting feedback while you do the problem. The learning experience is more interactive and more adaptive. It would be great if technology made it possible for every student in the world to benefit from this type of learning. Everyone can have their own private tutor.”

The successful pitch to Bill Gates

In a competitive market, Ben-Naim points to an interaction with Microsoft founder Bill Gates as evidence of a basic – and blunt – point of difference with competitors.

Pitching Smart Sparrow to Gates, who was looking to invest in education technology through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the computer scientist was clear about the difference between his company and others in the same market.

“There was a guy pitching to Gates before me and he was saying all the right words,” recalls Ben-Naim. “Then it was my time and I said, ‘Look, we’re just like the other guy but we are better.’”

Something clicked. Smart Sparrow was invited by Gates to join their US\$20 million Next-Generation Courseware Challenge – an initiative in which the Foundation identified and funded promising edtech start-ups. What caught Gates' attention was Smart Sparrow's idea to fund the Inspark Science Teaching Network. “Imagine if all the science educators in the world got together, created amazing digital learning experiences for their students, and then shared them with each other... that's the Inspark goal,” says Ben-Naim.

What Ben-Naim ultimately conveyed was that online courses have to be more than text and multiple choice quizzes.

“If kids only get good at answering multiple choice questions that means they never really have to solve the problem,” he says. “With our technology, you can create an immersive, interactive, and adaptive learning experience to really engage critical thinking.”

Ben-Naim came to Australia from Israel in 2002 as a student – he says he is an immigrant success story as much as a business story – and stayed in the country to create his now-global company.

“It is important for us to keep the company in Australia,” he says. (Smart Sparrow maintains their home office in Sydney.) “When I left Israel there was a big startup scene but today in Australia the startup scene is booming and I am happy to be part of that. I'm glad Australia caught up with Silicon Valley and Israel, which were leaders in innovation and startups.”

Ben-Naim predicts the future will see every student on the planet use personalised digital learning. It's a direction he agrees will change the way we learn and impact how knowledge is delivered.

“That doesn't mean teachers will be redundant,” he says. “That couldn't be further from the truth. But the role of teachers is going to change – just like the role of doctors. Personalised education will go mainstream.”

Find out more about [Smart Sparrow](#).