



The Oklahoman

Norman's NextThought connects the dots for online learners

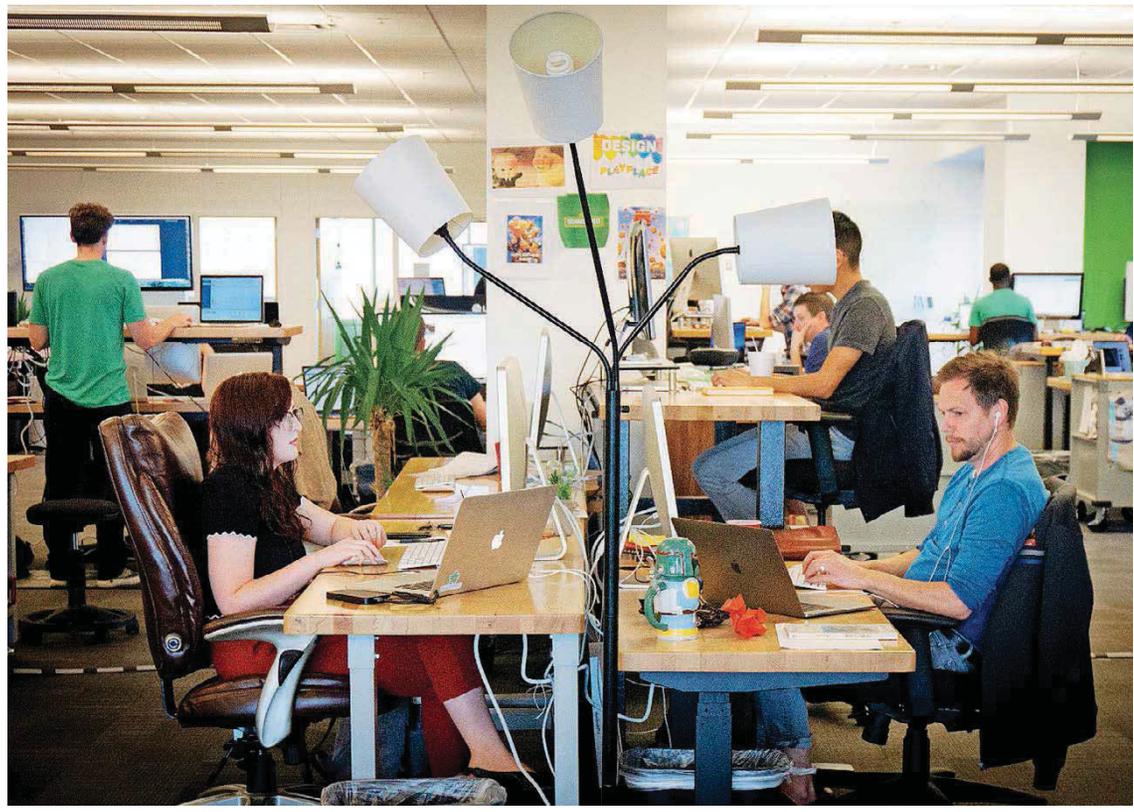
BY JIM STAFFORD
For The Oklahoman

NORMAN — When my daughter enrolled in an online college class, I had an image of her being alone on an island, connected only to the course material by way of a computer, with little interaction from the instructor. And no contact with her classmates.

However, my concept of the online classroom recently was turned upside down by Ken Parker, co-founder and CEO of Norman's NextThought LLC, a company that specializes in educational technology and "connected" learning.

"We focus on connecting people while they learn," Parker said. "So often, online education is treated as content distribution. We know there is so much more about good education that occurs when people learn together, when they interact, cooperate and collaborate on projects."

As a way to help me



SEE LEARNING, 6C

NextThought employs about 40 software programmers, designers, educational specialists and videographers. [PHOTO PROVIDED]



Source: Oklahoma Allergy and Asthma Clinic

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CONTINUED FROM 1C

visualize the impact that a connected online community has on students, Parker showed a graphic that looked like a map of the universe populated with points of light. Each point of light represented a student who had taken an online organic chemistry course delivered by NextThought.

Some points of light were much brighter than others and connected to several other points. All were students who were actively engaged with the coursework and interacting with classmates.

"These were people helping one another or sharing resources or support," Parker said. "In an online community, those connections form organically."

NextThought operates in an educational technology space in which there are large competitors such as Blackboard and Canvas. It differentiates itself by not only offering a connected online learning platform but also by providing complete course design and video production for school systems, universities and professional associations. It also develops online learning technology for mobile devices.

"The niche we have carved out is more of a full-service partner, where we can support someone who wants to teach their members or students, but they need help in creating the content, developing the curriculum or designing in a way maximized for online delivery," Parker said.

Since its founding, NextThought has developed a "deep and broad" relationship with the University of Oklahoma, and many of its employees



Ken Parker is co-founder and CEO of Norman's NextThought LLC, a company that specializes in educational technology and "connected" learning.

[PHOTO PROVIDED]

are OU graduates, Parker said. The company partnered with the university on the development of OU's Janux online learning community.

NextThought also claims the University of Central Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University as clients, as well as many other universities and professional associations. UCO's Institute for Learning Environment Design (iLED) emerged out of its relationship with NextThought.

"The University of Central Oklahoma Institute for Learning Environment Design and NextThought have collaborated on many important education innovation initiatives," iLED Director Bucky Dodd said. "We've strategically connected the talents and passions of both organizations in a unique public/private collaboration that is focused on making a difference for the future of education."

Located on OU's South Research Campus, NextThought employs about 40 software programmers, designers, educational specialists and videographers. The company was co-founded in 2011 by Parker, NextThought President Jeff Muehring and other veterans of a company called RiskMet-

rics Group.

Parker was a co-founder of RiskMetrics, which spun out of financial services giant JP Morgan in 1998. It provided financial risk analysis for clients based on terabytes of data generated daily by the world's stock markets. RiskMetrics was sold in 2010 after having grown into a publicly traded entity with 1,200 employees worldwide, including 150 in Norman.

NextThought established a strong relationship with the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST) and its Intern Partnership program, which places paid interns from state universities into Oklahoma companies on a cost-share basis.

"We have four OCAST interns now, and we have hired five former OCAST interns as full-time employees," Parker said. "Whenever an intern joins us, one of the cardinal rules is that you are doing meaningful work. We view interns as potential future teammates."

On the horizon are even more high tech educational opportunities as augmented and virtual reality technologies emerge into widespread use, Parker said.

"That's one area we are quite excited about," he said. "That is going to profoundly change education in the future. We're looking to use our media creation expertise to start creating those types of resources and weaving them into an educational journey."

For learners in NextThought's connected online community, it's a journey they don't have to make alone.

Jim Stafford writes about Oklahoma innovation and research and development topics on behalf of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science & Technology (OCAST).

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