



## BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Imagine an academic environment where student success is not measured by standardized testing, where course material can be tailored to individual learning objectives, and where geographical location is not a barrier to high quality education. Sound Utopian? Not to **JOHN BAKER (BASC '00, Systems Design)**, president and CEO of Desire2Learn.

Since starting Desire2Learn in 1999 while still a student at Waterloo, Baker has steadily transformed the learning and education landscape. Using innovative software suites to enhance and personalize the learning experience, Desire2Learn has quickly grown from a small start-up to an organization supporting more than 8-million users worldwide.

Baker, a self-described “problem-finder,” was inspired to start Desire2Learn after taking a third-year design workshop at Waterloo where he helped re-invent how crutches worked. “I realized that helping to improve society was something I was passionate about. So I started looking around for problems where I could have an impact. That course taught me about problem finding, not just problem solving, and that sparked something in me.”

Seeing potential to improve the learning experience, Baker began helping his professors

put class notes online. From there, the project snowballed into building technology that would allow faculty to create their own content, teach online and take assessments, and culminated with “building a whole learning experience that could break down barriers to high-quality learning.”

Breaking down barriers continues to be a main tenet of Desire2Learn. “One of the barriers we found was the lack of opportunity for people with visual disabilities to access high-quality education,” Baker said. As a result, he ensured that Desire2Learn platforms were certified by the National Institute for the Blind. “We set out to be nothing but the best learning system for the blind and we’ve achieved that goal. The majority of websites today are not accessible. We set out to make sure learning was, and we will continue to invest in improving the experience.”

In fact, Baker continues to be intrigued by all aspects of accessible learning. On a recent sightseeing trip down the Amazon River, Baker passed a boat full of children. It was a school bus. “I didn’t know they used boats to ship students up and down the river to go to class, but I guess the last thing you’d want to do is be taking kids home in the dark in the Amazon,” he laughed.

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