Academic Journal published by **SGH Warsaw School of Economics** and **Foundation for the Promotion and Accreditation of Economic Education**

e-mentor

Number 5 (82) 2019   ISSN 1731-6758

SZKOŁA GŁÓWNA HANDLOWA W. WARSZAWIE

ICT in education
Lifelong learning
Business and technologies
New trends in management
Teaching methods and programs

Shaping the Future of Learning.
Some thoughts after the Online Educa Global conference in Berlin, 27–29.11.2019

Maria Zając

Online Educa Berlin is a conference that attracts over 2,000 people from several dozen countries to the Intercontinental hotel every year. With such an impressive turnout, it is one of the largest conferences in Europe, and one of the most significant events focusing on the use of modern technologies in education and business training. It is also unique in that it has been held regularly for the past 25 years – always in the same city and around the same time, i.e. at the end of November or the beginning of December. The attendants are not discouraged by the short, dark days or by the November rain, nor by the substantial conference fee of almost 1000 euros. On the contrary, the atmosphere at the Intercontinental on those three conference day is always hot! A lot is happening, multiple sessions are held at the same time, there are numerous talks – both in the exhibition area and all across the conference space. It can definitely be said that anyone who visits Educa finds something to match their interests.

Topics and trends

The main theme of this year conference was **Shaping the Future of Learning**. Thus phrased, the area of interest was broad enough to cover a considerable diversity of issues, but at the same time too general to deliver specific answers or solutions. This could be noticed during the plenary debate, which usually centers around a thesis starting with "This house believes that…" This year, the thesis that the debate participants were to either agree with or argue against was the statement: "an obsession with economics is harming education and undermining the skills for the future." The guests invited to the debate always represent opposing views on the thesis – there are two supporters and two opponents. The premise was similar this year but the difference of opinions during the debate turned out to be relatively blurred, and the presented notions were neither particularly controversial nor inspiring. I had a feeling that this year's debate was disappointing. First and foremost, its description, which – as could be expected – reflected the assumptions of the organizers, previewed a completely different distribution of accents, or even a different starting point for the discussion. The question in the description was whether modern educators should focus more on developing the skills and competencies defined from the perspective of the current needs of the labor market, or whether the task of the education system should continue to involve shaping timeless, universal competencies to allow learners to adapt to the labor market also in a more distant time horizon. However, the question was not really addressed during the debate and as such, failed to clearly polarize the presented views. Actually, one could get an impression that the speakers were attempting to specify some more and less important areas where the economy impacts education systems in various countries rather than trying to convince the audience – and one another – about the validity of the thesis underlying the discussion. The closest to the topic of the debate was the speech of Olivier Crouzet from the Parisian Ecole 42 (School 42) where he highlighted the substantial interest on the part of the labor market, as measured by the number of job offers, for graduates of the avant-garde educational initiative for programmers that he was representing, already present in 18 countries.

The recording from the plenary debate was posted by the organizers on the conference home page in Publications (The OEB Debate), and it can be watched directly on the YouTube channel of the conference,[1] so everyone may follow the discussion on their own.

The plenary and concurrent sessions covered a number of issues already known and often present at conferences, such as: design thinking, artificial intelligence, and the use of virtual reality and augmented reality, or even holograms, in education. Substantial attention was devoted to the development of digital competencies and the competencies required in the digital era, and a lot was said about adaptive learning, about how to stimulate interaction and engage learners, and about apps that could effectively support the discussed educational endeavours and activities.

As far as the latest trends are concerned, the discussion about blockchain was noteworthy. It addressed the possibilities and usefulness of that technology as a carrier of information about the competencies and skills acquired by an individual, or even as a record of their whole academic education, including the diploma.[2] The issue of confirming the competencies

---

[1] Link to the recording on the conference website https://oeb.global/media#publications and directly on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WM8pS6Ywtk

acquired through formal education kept emerging during Educa in various contexts, highlighted much better than during the said plenary debate. It was addressed in speeches about open credentials and open badges (I should mention here a very interesting free workshop held on the day before the conference, managed by Ilona Buchem, entitled "The Role of Open Credentials for Virtual Mobility of Students and Teachers – Enhancing Internationalization in the University of the Future"). An additional issue that appeared during discussion at that workshop was the distinction between the terms 'Virtual Mobility' and 'Virtual Exchange.' The former is usually understood as participation in remote courses, offered, e.g., by MOOC platforms, while the latter is related to the idea of academic exchange, known, e.g., from the Erasmus program, but pursued remotely, with students from various centers participating in courses offered on the platform of a particular university and moderated by the teachers of that university.

A strong statement was made by Jef Staes in his speech entitled "Social Validation, the End of the 'Diploma Paradigm'" on the second day of the conference. He emphasized the positive role of "social assessment" in social media and juxtaposed it with the grades received during formal education, which, as he claimed, valued the ability to follow the rules rather than passion and talent, which were the prerequisites for the development of innovation and creativity. He tried to convince the audience that social validation and networking should be treated as methods to evaluate the skills and capabilities of an individual and, at the same time, as the basic tools for devaluation – and the resulting 'deconstruction' – of the notion of diplomas. The speaker has been a regular participant of the Berlin conference for years, and he has been trying to convince the audience that true change, both in education and in organizations, happens only if we give the floor to people with passion and talent instead of rewarding obedience and playing by the rules. Highly engaging and eloquent, his speeches attract the attention of listeners, even though they are seen as a kind of vision of a still distant future.

Participants

According to official statistics posted on the Educa Berlin website, the turnout was above 2,500 people, who came from 70 countries from all regions of the globe. For understandable reasons, the participation is the highest for European countries – 82%. Out of the top ten countries with the most attendants, nine are from Europe, with the United States coming sixth, as the only non-European member of that group. Considering the activity of American companies in the area of modern ICT technologies, their presence, especially among the exhibitors, seems natural, or even obvious.

It should be noted that the Top 10 includes Poland; it may be last but this still shows that our country was quite well represented in Berlin, despite the small number of speeches given by Polish participants, as per the list of speakers.

In the context of geographic range, it is also of significance that Educa has inspired the creation of analogical events in other regions of the world over the past years, such as E-learning Africa, which in a way took some participants from that part of the globe. Despite that, Educa in Berlin still attracts a large group of people interested in the application of modern technologies in both education (44% of the participants) and business (38%) every year. Some of them are regular attendees. There is also a relatively big group of those who come once every few years to learn about new trends in the world of education and technology-assisted learning, believing that such a 'periodic' presence is enough. Besides these groups, the event attracts completely new participants every year, who are so impressed with the scale, scope and theme of the event that they become regular guests at the conference in the next years. Regardless of the motivation, the interest in Educa is not decreasing, even though attendance is no longer growing as spectacularly as it used to 10 or 15 years ago.

Speakers

Due to its position and reputation, Online Educa Berlin attracts prominent speakers every year, both from the world of education and from business environments. This year's major names included Gilly Salmon, Laura Czerniewicz and Inge de Waard. They are known for their innovative activity in support of online education and promotion of the idea of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and mobile learning. Most of them were at some moment in life connected with Open University UK, like speakers Alan Tait or Mike Sharples. Other regular speakers at Educa are: Steve Wheeler (known among other things from his blog Learning with "e"s), Richard Straub (the creator of the Global Peter Drucker Forum) or Jef Staes (owner of the consultancy company Red Monkey, Belgium). The list of speakers was very long (over 300 people) since the organizers made sure to encourage representatives of all education sectors to participate, including official bodies, such as the European Commission, and ministries from various countries, including Poland (Rafał Lew-Starowicz). Associations related to technology-assisted education, such as EADL, EDEN, and EADTU, also sent numerous representatives to the conference. What needs to be emphasized is the presence of speakers who, though not involved in education directly, devote a lot of attention in their journalist, artistic or research activity to analyzing the necessary and inevitable changes that will help better prepare young generations to life in the

---

[2] The session devoted to blockchain in education is also available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiWcaf8UKPw

digital era. This group includes Bryan Alexander, Julian Stodd and Laura Overton, to name a few.

Exhibitors

Ever since the first Educa Online conferences, exhibitors have formed a distinctive and integral part of the event. Those who participated in the initial meetings at the Intercontinental most likely remember how the area occupied by booths of companies that wanted to present their services dedicated to assisting formal education and corporate training kept growing every year. There even was a time when it seemed that the Berlin event was dominated by exhibitors, with conference participants having trouble passing through between the booths.

The exhibitors at the 25th Educa Online conference included leaders of the educational apps market, such as: *Kaltura, Panopto, Presentations2go, D2L, Docebo, Echo 360, Itslearning, Moodle and eThink, TechSmith and Turnitin, Questionmark*, and *ProctorU*. Their solutions for comprehensive learning management systems, tools for creation of educational content (especially videos) and ways of testing and engaging learners are generally known. What is noteworthy is the emergence of alternative ideas, often developed by small start-ups in response to specific needs of the university or the center where they originated. Major ones include *Digiexam* from Sweden (an app for digital examination), *Moovly* from Belgium (a simple tool for making educational videos), and *eLearning* from Denmark (a cloud-based platform that permits organizing the learning process based on shared video materials and the related test questions). Another interesting – and free – app is *Acadly*, offered by a young programming company from India. As a response system, it permits active participation in a lecture and allows the teacher to follow the forms and scale of students' participation. A completely atypical app that also deserves attention is *Renaissance Learning* – created at the initiative of parents with the support of educators and scientists who care about developing the reading competencies of children and teenagers. The app not only provides access to almost 6,000 digital books, but also makes it possible to organize activities, formulate tasks and check knowledge, with parents and teachers able to follow the progress of its users. *Virtual Orator* by a company from the Czech Republic is an interesting example of how virtual reality can be used. The app allows one to prepare for public speeches in various conditions by letting them choose the venue and the duration of the presentation, and even enable questions from virtual listeners.

It must be emphasized that the presented choice is highly subjective and is determined by specific interests. Aside from the aforesaid education solutions, the exhibitors presented interesting, often niche solutions for business training, but I will leave this topic to those who are more versed in this area of application.

Pros and cons

The list of topics addressed during the Berlin conference was very broad – after all, they were discussed at over 120 sessions. However, we can identify a number of issues that were covered multiple times and in many lectures. They include: learner engagement, personalizing learner experience and adaptive learning, instructional design, education 4.0 and education for the future, open resources and open credentials, serious gaming and gamification, neuroscience and brain-based learning, microlearning, learning with humanoid robots, artificial intelligence for teaching and assessment, videos and podcasts, virtual and augmented reality, security and personal data, students as digital changemakers, and accessibility and inclusive education. It should be emphasized that the majority of the above concepts are not new, but have been present both at Educa and at other conferences devoted to modern education and assisting technologies for years. There are only slight shifts, some topics disappear or are rephrased (e.g. "adaptive learning" in lieu of the previously popular "personalized learning"), emphasis changes (e.g. "learning experience" is pushing out "learning design" to emphasize the more active, subjective role of the learner), and new technological solutions emerge along with their advocates.

So, is the Educa conference in Berlin worth it? It definitely is. Primarily as an international forum that presents the latest technological solutions, the results of current research and projects devoted to education and training in the digital age, as well as new concepts and ideas in education. True, an attentive observer and listener will quickly notice that the changes that are proposed or discussed are not so rapid and so inevitable as the presentations and lectures sometimes suggest, and they are either repeated year after year as new ideas or their promotion requires persistence as it may take several years for the outcomes of certain endeavors to shine. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that the Berlin conference is an excellent place to learn current trends and changes in basically all areas of teaching and training.

It is an opportunity to confront the problems we sometimes face in our own environment with those experienced by educators or coaches from other countries, universities or organizations. We might benefit from exploring them from a different perspective, capitalizing on the possibilities offered by the large international forum.

The relatively inconvenient time is a certain drawback – the short, usually dark and rainy days at the end of November and the beginning of December definitely do not encourage people to visit the capital of Germany at that time of the year, so I would like to conclude this brief account from Educa Online 2019 with a small suggestion for the organizers to consider another, more friendly season as an additional incentive for participation in subsequent editions of OEB Global.