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Edtech Europe 2015 Throws Up More Than Enough Questions and Answers To Pass The Test

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More than 650 people from more than 40 different countries attended this year's EdTech Europe conference on June 18th, and 120 different speakers addressed the crowds over the course of the day including Liz Sproat, Head of Education EMEA for Google, Karine Allouche Salanon, CEO of [Pearson English Business Solutions](#), Venture Capitalist and CEO of [SHO-Zemi Innovation Ventures](#) Yoshio Okamoto, Sal Khan of the [Khan Academy](#) and Dr. Stacey Clawson, Senior Program Officer for the [Bill and Melinda Gates foundation](#).

Just as importantly there were a decent number of teachers or ex-teachers in attendance as well. Nobody is in any doubt that the business of EdTech is worth billions, if not trillions of dollars, but there is also a consensus of opinion that the thoughts and views of the teacher in the classroom are rarely taken into account, and that a great deal of investment is wasted on projects which are faddy, unworkable or unnecessary. It's even been suggested that funding start-up EdTech projects results in money being diverted from more worthwhile educational activities such as teacher training or pastoral care, to the detriment of the children in the classroom.

In his excellent [opening presentation speech](#), EdTech conference co-founder Benjamin Vedrenne Cloquet described the transition to digital in education as “not an avalanche but a long rising tide”, so perhaps there is a degree of comfort to be taken from that. In fact, Vedrenne Cloquet also pointed out that only 3% of spending in education is on digital vs around 35% in most other content based industries, which nullifies the arguments against EdTech somewhat, as well as suggesting a pretty attractive 12x growth potential for those that are prepared to invest.



Ed Tech Europe panel discussion in full session; photo courtesy of EdTech Europe

This will not happen fast, however, he added; “digital education as a service” will take time to gain the approval it needs amongst governing bodies and governments, and there is certainly no sign of printed resources (which continue to dominate in terms of content distribution) being phased out any time soon. If they are at all, it will most likely be the publishing giants; Pearson, McGraw Hill, Harper Collins, for example, who will decide how and when, and who are therefore most likely to control the fate of their digital replacements.

Answering his own question, “will the future need us” Vedrenne Cloquet spoke about the 3 pillars of education: content, methodology and teachers. Whilst the recent \$1.5bn acquisition of Lynda.com by LinkedIn represents the 4th largest deal in social media history, a huge fillip and enticement for the venture capital industry, as in any other digital start-up Eco-system there will be many more failures than successes, and that is because the core values that represent what teaching is all about remain constant and do not require as much “disruption” as some people might think. What is true is that emerging markets are likely to benefit more and quicker than most and for the most part that is right and proper, however it's important that it should not be to the detriment of developed ones.

Liz Sproat at Google gave an insightful presentation on Transformation and Technology in Education; given the size of the cultural and financial impact Google can have on almost any industry it cares to involve itself in, the company's new platform and suite of apps for education is worth paying close attention to. The theme of Sproat's talk was “who is going to create the future?” The answer, it seems, is that it could be anyone, from anywhere, but that they will most likely be doing it with a Google Chromebook on Google's education platform, [Classroom](#).

According to research carried out by the Economist which Sproat quoted, employers are increasingly prioritising problem solving skills, teamwork, communication, critical thinking and creativity over acquired knowledge, academic achievement and intellectual prowess. Students are increasingly rated according to their emotional intelligence rather than their intelligence quotient as the world becomes more and more connected and social skills increasingly highly prized.

This is obviously an area where Google is perfectly positioned to dominate. It can deliver IT resources cheaper than any of its rivals thanks to its sheer size and the company enjoys a reputation for inspiring the kind of lateral thinking and personality traits that are apparently so sought after in today's workplace. It is worth pointing out however, that as well as blue sky thinkers and ambitious astronauts, the world of the future is just as likely to require qualified doctors and nurses, university professors, engineers, accountants and lawyers, professions which still require academic qualifications and encyclopaedic knowledge of subject matter as much as mavericks and socialites.

Another criticism that was levelled at digital and online learning tools at one or two panel discussions I attended was the low levels of completion rates associated with MOOCs: massive open online courses. These are courses, available online, aimed at anybody with an internet connection and a thirst for knowledge, containing video lectures, online testing, forums and access to teaching assistants. All too often, however, courses are abandoned midway through as participant's interests and attention spans wane. The conclusion seems to be that we are not as self-disciplined as we would like to imagine, or even as digital entrepreneurs tell us we are. In most cases, a good teacher is still the most engaging feature of an educational course, no matter how carefully prepared it may be.

That said, there were many, many, genuinely innovative and exciting companies exhibiting at the conference. [Pluralsight](#) is an award winning provider of training courses that boasts one of the world's largest tech and creative training libraries; [Lend Me Your Literacy](#) inspires young authors by showcasing their work online and allowing them to connect with fellow young writers from all over the world, and [Filtered.com](#) provides personalised online training for the world's 600m knowledge workers. Perhaps the real value of online education and the target of entrepreneurs should be the world outside of the classroom; from coding academies, to playing a musical instrument, to creative writing, to in-house training and qualifications, this is where innovation and market disruption finds its most natural home. Incidentally, it also happens to be the most lucrative branch of the EdTech market.

Another attendee playing a key role at the conference was Matt Keller, Senior Director at [XPRIIZE](#). XPRIIZE are in the business of providing incentivised competitions to help solve some of the world's biggest problems. The Ansari XPRIIZE which was awarded in 2004 helped ignite the commercial space industry as entrepreneurs including Richard Branson and Elon Musk attempted to outdo one another all in the cause bringing innovation and extra funding into the space exploration industry.

In fact it is Musk who has provided funding for the \$15m Global Learning XPRIIZE a competition that challenges teams from around the world to develop open-source, scalable software to enable children in developing countries to teach themselves basic reading, writing and arithmetic within the 18 month competition field-testing period. There are 198 teams from 40 countries, including 12 from the UK and 26 from Africa, who have signed up to take part in the challenge; finalists will be chosen in 18 months time and awarded \$1m each in funding, before the winner is chosen at the end of a 4 year process. There's every chance that the Global Learning programme could have a similar role to play in the democratisation of quality educational and learning activities as the Ansari XPRIIZE or Oil Cleanup XPRIIZE had on their respective fields.

I also had the chance to briefly catch up with Dr Stacey Clawson of the Gates foundation. Although their work is primarily focused on the United States, helping to increase the numbers of students from low income backgrounds attending college and going on to obtain a degree, she had found the conference a useful opportunity to discover more about the technology market and philanthropy in Europe and to deliver a fascinating keynote speech including a discussion of the role tech can play in helping to solve the skills gap challenge. The Gates foundation are investors in the Khan Academy, a pioneering project begun by chance when Sal Khan began recording YouTube videos to help his relatives solve complex maths problems. The Khan academy has now grown to an 80 person organisation with more than 26m subscribers and represents a fine example of how a well-executed project can make a real difference to a person's capacity to be educated.

At the end of what seemed like a pretty productive day for attendees, speakers, entrepreneurs and investors I caught up with the conference's other co-founder Charles McIntyre, who is also CEO of Venture Capital firm Ibis Capital. He re-emphasised the sentiments from the day's opening address; that change in the education sector is inevitable, it is coming, but it will not happen overnight. He said he felt that most attendees had been able to meet with, swap ideas, exchange business cards or even shake hands on a deal with the people they had hoped to. This was a sign, he suggested, that the future of EdTech is bright, and that it is in the right hands.

Whilst it's worth remembering that gadgets do not inspire people, people inspire people, there is certainly no harm in a well-constructed teaching aid either. Where children are concerned there is a basic level of education that must be attained by all, and where adults are concerned there is a massive market and huge potential to prove that you *can* teach an old dog new tricks. EdTech has a massive future and it would be no surprise to see a 2 day conference next year.