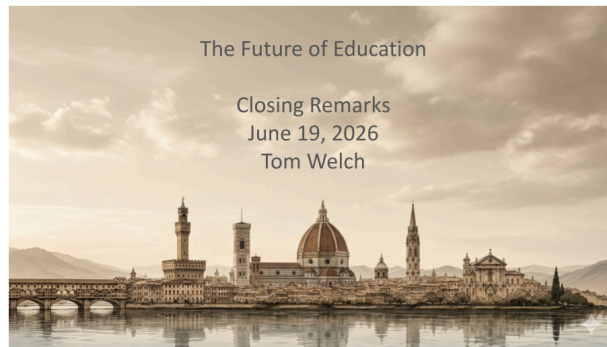


FOE 2026 Closing remarks

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Good afternoon.

When Valeria invited me to deliver the closing remarks for this conference, she suggested that I summarize the papers and presentations we have heard over the past two days.

I quickly realized that this would be impossible.

Over these two days we have heard 100 presentations and 6 poster presentations from participants representing 46 countries. We have been exposed to ideas from every corner of the world and from nearly every area of education.

No individual could adequately summarize all of that work.

So instead, I would like to share a few observations about what I have heard, what I have learned, and perhaps most importantly, what this gathering itself represents.

Before I begin, I want to make a brief confession.

The remarks I am about to share are the result of a collaboration.

Over the past two days I attended every session except one. I filled pages and pages with notes. This morning I took those notes, my observations, my photos, my questions, and my reflections, and worked with AI to help organize them into a coherent whole.



The ideas are mine; the experiences are mine; the voice is mine, but the process is shared. And it strikes me that this partnership reflects many of the conversations we have had throughout this conference about the future of learning and the future of human work.

It also seems fitting that we are having these conversations here in Florence. When people think about Florence, they often think about extraordinary individuals. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Brunelleschi.

But the Renaissance was not simply the story of extraordinary people. It was the story of extraordinary connections. Ideas moving across borders. Scholars traveling from one city to another. Merchants bringing knowledge along with goods. Patrons creating spaces where experimentation was possible.

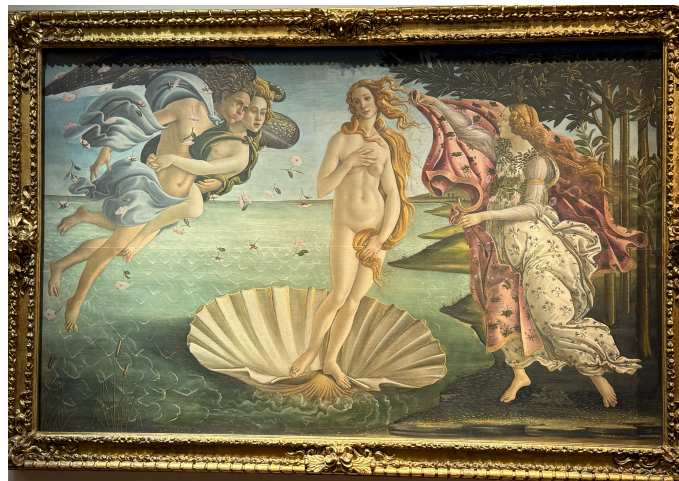
The Renaissance emerged because people encountered ideas different from their own.

In many ways, that is exactly what has happened here over the past two days. 278 people face to face and virtual from 46 countries giving us all countless perspectives. and a shared willingness to learn from one another. In fact, after listening to many of the presentations at this conference, I came away with a surprising realization.

While our topics varied enormously, many of us were wrestling with remarkably similar questions. The language was different. The contexts were different. The countries were different. But beneath those differences were common concerns and common hopes.



As I walked through Florence this week, I spent time looking at art. This image by Giotto represents a world that is still deeply medieval. The purpose is not realism. The purpose is not individuality. The purpose is certainty. The image serves a message. The structure defines the experience.



A century later, something changes. The individual begins to emerge. Human beings become more visible. More expressive. More complex. The focus begins to shift.

And then we arrive at Leonardo.



This unfinished work fascinates me. Leonardo was willing to leave questions unresolved. He was willing to explore. To experiment. To remain curious. Perhaps that is one of the defining characteristics of every renaissance. Not certainty. Curiosity. Not answers. Questions.

Standing beneath Brunelleschi's dome this week, I found myself thinking about the challenge he faced.



The problem wasn't simply building something larger. Florence already knew how to build. The challenge was that the traditional methods no longer worked. The span was too large. The old solutions could not solve the new problem. What fascinates me is that Brunelleschi did not begin by asking: "How can I do this the way it has always been done?" He asked: "What new structures are required?"

That question feels remarkably relevant today. Not only in education but across society.

And it brings me back to this conference.

Across sessions on artificial intelligence, language learning, digital skills, higher education, democratic participation, intercultural communication, virtual reality, and educational innovation, I kept hearing the same fundamental questions.

How do we honor individual differences? How do we create more meaningful learning experiences? How do we prepare learners for a world that is changing rapidly? And perhaps most importantly: How do we ensure that technology expands human potential rather than diminishing it?

Different presenters approached these questions in different ways. Some focused on AI. Others focused on multilingualism. Others explored mobility, inclusion, democracy, digital transformation, self-efficacy, or personalized learning. Yet beneath these differences, several themes appeared again and again.

First, the recognition that learners are not all the same. Whether discussing digital skills, language learning, prior learning, or educational pathways, presenter after presenter emphasized human variation.

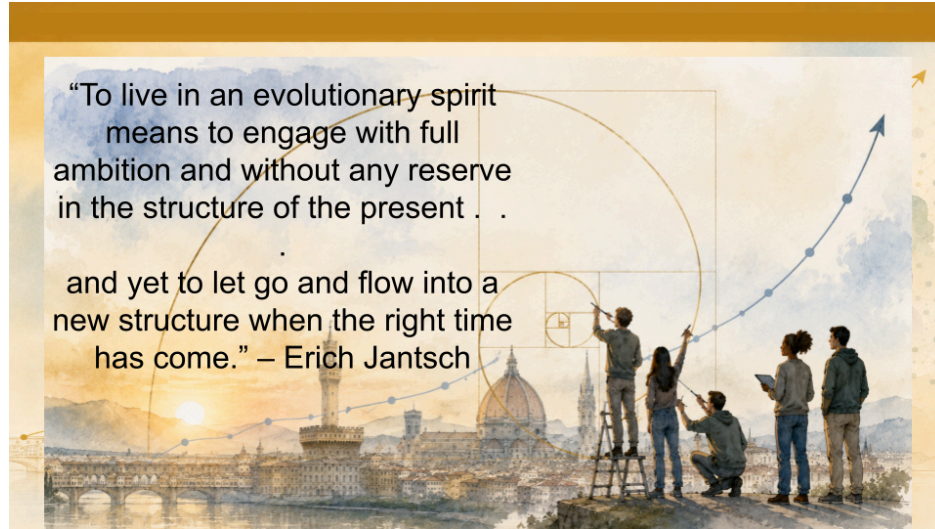
Second, the importance of connection. Many presentations focused on collaboration, dialogue, mobility, intercultural understanding, and community.

Third, the changing role of educators. I heard many descriptions of teachers as facilitators, guides, mediators, co-creators, and learning partners. The language may differ, but the underlying idea was remarkably consistent.

And finally, I heard a growing recognition that the challenges we face cannot always be solved simply by improving existing practices. Some of our questions may require us to rethink the structures themselves. I heard several colleagues comment that while attracted to innovative ideas, they were frustrated by the intransigence of institutions and the difficulties involved in making significant structural change. That frustration is understandable. Structural change is hard. It was hard in Brunelleschi's time. It remains hard today.

But history reminds us that every age eventually encounters problems that its inherited structures were never designed to solve.

Perhaps that is one of the central questions before education today. Not simply how to improve what already exists, but how to imagine what might come next.



We often tell the story of the Renaissance as the story of great individuals. But historians increasingly remind us that the Renaissance was actually a network. Ideas traveled, books traveled, merchants traveled, scholars traveled, Erasmus traveled. And knowledge crossed borders. And because knowledge crossed borders, new possibilities emerged.

Looking around this conference, I cannot help wondering whether the most important thing that happened this week was not any individual presentation.

Perhaps it was the conversations between presentations. The coffee breaks. The questions. The disagreements. The unexpected connections. The email addresses exchanged. The future collaborations that have not yet begun. Those are the things that often change the future.

One final observation. For a conference that spent so much time discussing technology and artificial intelligence, I was struck by how often the conversation returned to deeply human concerns. Qualities such as confidence, identity, belonging, purpose, community, agency.

Perhaps the future of education will not be defined by whether we use artificial intelligence. Perhaps it will be defined by whether we use it to become more fully human.

Over these two days we have not solved the challenges before us. Nor did we expect to, but we have done something equally important. We have listened. We have questioned. We have challenged assumptions, not only those of others, but perhaps some of our own as well. We have shared experiences. And we have built relationships. The conversations that began here do not need to end when we leave Florence.

The Renaissance was not created in a conference. It emerged through ongoing networks of people exchanging ideas over time. Perhaps our greatest responsibility now is to continue these conversations. To remain connected, to continue learning from one another. And to carry these ideas back to our institutions, our colleagues, and our students.

During these two days we have discussed improving learning, improving teaching, improving institutions, improving technology, improving access.

All of that matters. But Erich Jantsch reminds us of something deeper. The future is not the result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created.

Florence teaches us that lesson. The Renaissance was not a better version of the Middle Ages. It was something new. The dome was not an improved cathedral roof; it was something new.

And perhaps the future of education will not emerge from choosing among the alternatives already in front of us. Perhaps it will emerge from our willingness to imagine possibilities that do not yet exist.

As we prepare to leave Florence, I would like to thank the organizers, the presenters, the reviewers, the volunteers, and all of you who traveled here to share your work.

And I would like to leave you with one final thought. The Renaissance was not known as "The Improved Middle Ages." It became something new because people were willing to imagine new possibilities.

May we have the same courage.

Thank you.