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common sense about future of education, ideas, practice, opinions, success stories (and failures) from my own life on two continents

Future of Education in Florence – Report

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The Conference on Future of Education held in Florence set itself up for very high expectations just because of the title. There were 11 thematic areas from Studies on Education, through Innovative Teaching and Learning Methodologies, Art Education, e-Learning. Gender Equality and Learning Games to People with Disabilities and Distance Education. 258 participants registered and they presented 209 papers. The amount was overwhelming and since there were 4 parallel sessions I did not have a chance to see it all. But I was running from one room to another and tried to get as much as possible, hoping to read at least some of the papers later on. The conference was really well organized, everything was prepared and taken care of, including a Florence tour. We were running on Italian schedule, starting everything late but somehow finishing before time.

The opening keynote speech “Future Challenges for the European Education System” presented by Stanislav Ranguelov from the European Commission, gave a perfect perspective to the issues in education. It showed how incredibly complex the subject is. Mr. Ranguelov presented us with the results of a huge Eurydice report on Education and Learning and Innovation through ICT at School in Europe. He tackled the problem of population and dropping number of children which constitutes a huge problem for teachers and public authorities. On the other hand young people have the tendency to stay longer in the education process. Looking at the statistics from all the European countries it is visible that the trend is to provide more years of compulsory education. Then there is a question whether the education should be private or public. Statistics show that the majority still chooses public education and even the majority of chosen private education is funded publicly. Parent choice of a public school is allowed only in 4 European countries and at the same time it seems to be the biggest factor for a school success. Teachers are more and more qualified and in some countries they receive practical education in addition to theory. Teachers are also a group that goes on retirement as early as it is only possible. Not many countries plan ahead for the numbers of teachers (like Finland does) and so in many countries there is a threat of aging and therefore a sudden need for large numbers of new teachers who will then not be experienced for some time to come. We talked about the costs of education and the fact that people with tertiary education have a much better chance to find a job but often that job is not relevant to their education.

Mr. Ranguelov mentioned 5 major challenges for education:

- Need to reduce the early school leavers
- Increase the participation in primary education
- Ensure the equality in education
- Reduce the gaps between schools
- Work on the optimal size of the classes

He also mentioned challenges for teachers:

- Significant fall in the proportion of graduates in the field of education and training
- Salaries (to compensate for inflation)
- Increase in the average number of active teaching hours

These challenges were visible during the whole conference. This is probably the only reproach that I could have towards the conference: I did not see much of the future but I definitely saw a lot of problems with the presence fortunately often combined with some ideas as to their solution.

Ms May M.H. Cheng from Hong Kong Institute of Education mentioned a big challenge for the teachers in Hong Kong. Apparently this country is trying to move from teacher-centered education to student-centered education but the teachers are often unable to make the shift and to understand the new approach as they were taught in a different way. Ms Cheng stressed that this shift is really fundamental for the success of education.

Ruth Trinder from Vienna University of Economics and Business underlined the importance of students' choice in learning process. Independent learning occurs when students can at least choose when they are going to complete the assignment. When they have some influence on the process. She also stressed the fact that technology should not drive pedagogy. She noticed that though most university students are digital natives does not mean that they will embrace self-access online learning with enthusiasm. In fact a study was performed at her university where students were allowed to choose the blend between traditional and electronic ways and materials for language learning and as it turned out they chose the online learning just before exams and appreciated the fact that it allowed for freedom of time and place but they still valued the traditional approach. Participating in classes allowed them to keep in touch with their peers, learn where they are with materials and judge their level of proficiency. Ms Trinder mentioned some positive aspects of eLearning that she gathered from students during her study:

- The choice of time, place and speed
- Individualized practice
- Immediacy of explanation & feedback
- Monitoring and consolidation of knowledge

And some negative ones:

- Learner beliefs about language learning
- Belief in importance of oral interaction
- Too much use of eLearning in general (students are tired of learning with computers)

She summarized that what influences the use of online materials are some learner factors:

- Perceived need (e.g. self-assessment of linguistic competence, novelty of subject matter)
- Learner beliefs, learning styles and main goals
- Capacity for self-regulated learning

And some contextual factors:

- Endorsement by opinion leaders (teachers or peers)
- External structure (such as tie-in with regular classes , online mid-term tests)
- Exam relevance

Rajaa M. Albool from Birzeit University in Palestine shared her project of utilizing story telling strategy in teaching mathematics and its effect on grade four students' achievement and motivation towards learning mathematics. The outcome was pretty straightforward: the children enjoyed the storytelling and were able to grasp the mathematical concepts more efficiently. Apparently our mind organizes itself better in storytelling.

Pietrina De Giorgi from Istituto d'Instruzione Superiore 'R. Canudo' in Italy presented a study on Social Skills for Good Mood and Better Learning. She defined important social skills that should be worked on and shaped in the classrooms: regard, acceptance, ability to work together, tolerance, individual responsibility and relationship. The outcome of the study was that students can become really creative when working in a positive environment.

Silvija Karklina from Public Service Language Centre in Latvia mentioned some opposition arguments against ICT: costs (it is still quite expensive), the need to a very close cooperation between designer, developer and teacher in order to achieve success (therefore a single teacher doesn't really have a chance to produce successful material on their own), the requirements for users' and teachers' skills.

Diane Boothe and Ross Vaughn from Boise State University in USA talked about the importance of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education. Apparently – as the research suggests – STEM workers create ideas that become commercialized and yield additional jobs. The key is to make those subject relevant, increase the understanding and expose the students to good introduction so they choose them as a career path.

Polona Kelava from Educational Research Institute in Slovenia showed the interdependence between social inclusion and non-formal learning. She suggested a very interesting idea of rewarding the skills that the individuals obtain in informal learning to include them more in a society, to make them feel a part of it, to make them feel necessary.

Jolita Savicke from Kaunas University of Technology in Lithuania played some ancient Lithuanian instrument to show the audience the power of personalized learning environment. It was amazing to see how such a simple experiment uncovers the undeniable truth that we all perceive learning differently, that we all have a different approach and have a different appreciation for even a simple piece of music not mentioning all the other educational stimuli.

Eugene J. Monaco from Albany State University in USA showed the 'dark side' of online courses. According to some statistics 6.1 million students took an online course in fall 2011 which is an increase by 10.1% compare to 2009. But completion rates have not kept up with this increase. Drop-out rates can be as high as 50%. The reason? Students were questioning the quality and the relevance of the courses. It is not enough to provide learning in the online/technology form. First we have to redefine education and then we can improve the online courses. But what Mr. Monaco was talking about was improving the courses by using usability tests. They improve the learnability, efficiency, memorability and satisfaction and to diminish the number of errors. In my opinion this is still mostly the form and we need to think about the content but it is always a step forward. Especially when we

consider the fact that testing done by 5 expert users uncovers 75% of the problems.

Jan Gejel from European LABlearning project in Denmark talked about games. He summarized the history of developing educational games from a really interesting perspective saying that there was an antagonism and distance between education and games as the latter ones were for killing people while education was about educating them J. Then we started to put different content but those educational products turned out not to be very good games. So we stopped to look at the content of the killing games and looked more into the way the learning was organized. And we discovered that some powerful educational principals were embedded in those games. So now we have realized the educational potential of games. But somehow we still cannot produce a really good serious game. Mr. Gejel suggested that good games cannot be produced on market terms. The market may produce commercial games but not serious games for education. To unfold the potential of those games we need different business model. Establish new culture of education. Education needs to collaborate with the game producer. I think we need to watch closely as LABlearning may soon produce something spectacular J

Maja Pivec from University of Applied Sciences in Austria talked about game based learning (GBL). She pointed out that the mere term ‘game’ can demotivate a lot of people in terms of learning. There are some big issues that we need to analyze before proceeding with game development: how can we make adults learn and have fun in a serious way? What is the big appeal for youngsters? How can we make games culturally adaptable to different countries, different age, technology and need to be easily accessible? She also mentioned the barriers for usage of GBL approaches:

- Complexity of activities
- Duration time of game-based activities
- Meeting the learning objectives
- Language of the resources
- Competences of the learners/trainers
- Technical equipment needed/available
- Access to the resources
- Costs

And then at the end – in the closing speech – Pablo Campos Calvo-Sotelo from Universidad Ceu San Pablo in Spain talked about Architecture for Education: Cities, Campus, Buildings, Classrooms. He pointed out that education is a spatial act and it requires space. Interaction with that space is very important. The space has a significant impact on human mind and where we learn is equally important as what we learn and how we do it.

A lot of issues were raised. A lot of problems revealed. And maybe that is really what is necessary: to realize what is being done wrong, what needs to be changed. To define the problem. My boss in the Law Office always taught me that defining the problem constitutes 90% of its solution.

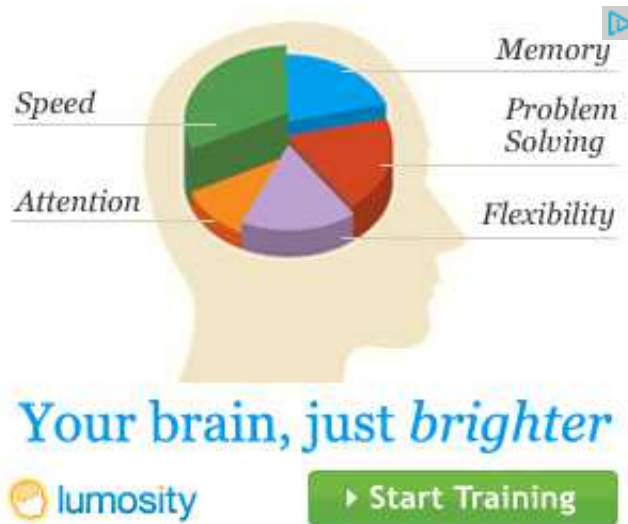
Getting back to Mr. Ranguelov there have been some suggestions as to the future, provided as well:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training

- Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- Enhancing creativity and innovation including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training

Combined with the results of presented studies and personal recommendations of the participants they ensure hard work and lay a lot tasks ahead of us. We have to start working now in order to shape the future of education tomorrow.

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