

e-mentor

DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJ KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH

2018, nr 2 (74)



Maria Zając, *Innovation and experiments at OLC Innovate 2018*, "e-mentor" 2018, s. 60–62,
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15219/em74.1353>.

Innovation and experiments at OLC Innovate 2018

Maria Zajac*

This year, in April, I participated for the first time at the OLC Innovate Conference which took place in Nashville, TN. Why for the first time? Mainly because of the geographical distance. From Krakow (Poland), where I live, to Nashville it is 8039 km (4995 miles), and the distance is similar to other OLC conference locations in the US, which makes such experiences very expensive and hardly affordable. As an academic actively involved for many years in online education in Poland, and the editor-in-chief of an academic journal aimed, among other things, at e-learning and technology enhanced learning, I was really thrilled when I received a free press pass for virtual attendance at the OLC Innovate conference.

Virtual attendance has its pros and cons. You do not need to travel and to overcome jet lag after a long boring flight, but on the other hand you have to rearrange your daily duties to be able to participate in live sessions, which is not always easy. The other important drawback is that virtual participation will never give you the same opportunity to make new contacts, to interact with others and to feel the atmosphere of the gathering in the same way as face-to-face attendance. However, it should be stressed that the organizers put in a lot of effort to help virtual participants to get involved in the event.

Brief Characteristics – tracks and sessions

First of all, the variety of sessions must be emphasized. As one can read in the conference program, the volume of numerous education sessions was extended by *emerging ideas meetings, workshops, innovation labs, the Solution Design Summit and Career Forum Roundtables*. The organizers also included a couple of less formal gatherings, like: *Conversations – Not Presentations* (to foster slide-free discussion and dialogue) and *Campfire Stories*. The number of tracks was also impressive: *Teaching and Learning Innovation; Leadership and Change Management; The Education-Workforce Continuum; Processes, Problems, and Practices; Effective Tools, Toys and Technologies* as well as *Research Highlights and Innovations*. The scope was broad and presumably everyone could find something interesting and new.

A reasonable number of sessions was also available for virtual attendance, either as streamed sessions, YouTube recordings or short on-the-spot reports via the zoom.us app that allowed the virtual participants to “walk around” and watch what was happening at chosen places and booths. They could even ask questions and get a response from the presenters or hosts of those booths. In general, it must be stressed that live online interaction with the presenters or the invited guests was granted, and several social channels like Twitter, Slack and Facebook were available.

Innovation at different levels

This short overview is not intended to be complete, but I would like to point out three different examples of innovation on three different levels. The first one refers to the institutional or even system change that is likely to happen in the near future. The second reflects a significant shift in learning assessment, and last but not least is the holistic approach to the use of technology at HE institutions.

The first was presented by Barbara Bichelmeyer (University of Missouri – Kansas City). There were two elements in her presentation that I would like to recall here. The first one was the necessity to redefine some basic concepts of higher education, including education itself. Other concepts that Barbara mentioned are: expertise, the role of the degree, and interactivity collocated with students’ engagement. The background for these changes is the internet, which “is breaking the old paradigm of education as information dissemination” by “bringing the truth into our collective consciousness that the purpose of education is not, information dissemination, but rather it is human capacity-building”. In consequence – according to the presenter – the internet leads to the significant disaggregation of the university infrastructure in at least five ways:

- disaggregation of teaching from certification,
- disaggregation of the elements of instruction,
- disaggregation of instructional responsibilities,

* E-mentor Academic Journal – Warsaw School of Economics

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- disaggregation of faculty roles,
- disaggregation of educational services.

At OLC Innovate 2018 there were quite a few presentations linked to assessment, but here I would like to refer to one of the OLC Live meetings in which Dave Goodrich talked to Erik Skogsberg about the idea of “ungraded assessment” commonly referred to as “narrative evaluation”. Erik recalled his experience at the university college that he had chosen because of the approach to assessment they applied, with no letter grades but with the narrative twofold evaluation instead. The first part was student self-evaluation while the second one was the teacher’s feedback and description of how well the student was doing throughout a project, a course or a semester. For some courses these descriptive evaluations replaced the traditional transcripts creating a sort of a portfolio. The idea itself is not really new, but the point is that not giving grades is one of the ways of passing the responsibility and agency for learning to the learner. And sometimes it may constitute a real obstacle, as was mentioned in John Stewart’s interview with Ken Bauer, a Canadian who teaches at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico. While talking about introducing the flipped classroom model at the university, he stressed that sometimes the students’ resistance originating from the way they were taught at school is even more difficult to overcome than that of the teachers. And in his opinion the main reason for that was the responsibility for their own learning that the students must take over.

The use of ICT in education has its proponents and opponents and will not be under discussion here, but it cannot be denied that the positive impact it may have depends heavily on the way technology is being used, and for what purpose. At OLC Innovate 2018 a very interesting overview of technology-based tools was delivered by Amy Homkes-Hayes from the University of Michigan Office of Academic Innovation. Her presentation *Growing Digital Pedagogy in The Digital Innovation Greenhouse at the University of Michigan* provided a whole bunch of apps created by the staff of DI hub and aimed at different tasks. A stunning feature of that offer is the holistic approach to the needs of the learner, who is in the center of attention. As declared during the session, “the technology is used to put data in learners’ hands. This supports decision making, triggers personal connections, motivates action, and guides behavior change”. The following list of apps derived from the conference presentation illustrates what was meant by that statement:

1. ART 2.0 – Academic Reporting Tools: academic data to help make choices;
2. ECoach – personalized messaging for students: getting the right message to the right person at the right time in the right way;
3. GradeCraft – Gameful Pedagogy for Learning: gameful course design is a pedagogical approach that leverages inspiration from well-designed games to create engaging learning environments;

4. Healthy Minds – a web-based survey for colleges and universities to assess the mental health landscape and mental health service use/usefulness at their schools;
5. M-Write – a tool that supports writing in large-enrollment courses by creating corpora of students writing for text analysis, which on the one hand will be automated and on the other will provide actionable information to students and instructors;
6. Online Learning Tools like:
 - a) multimeasure (visualization tool),
 - b) problem roulette (low risk practice problems for exam prep and topic mastery),
 - c) viewpoint (engaged and interactive role-playing simulations),
 - d) wireless indoor location device (a unique platform for kinesthetic learning).

Active participation and engagement

Apart from the social channels already mentioned, there was a variety of other activities that supported making new contacts and exchanging ideas. The names of some of them sound a bit exotic and at the same time intriguing in the conference context, at least from the European perspective: Star Search, Swap-and-Meet or Evening Campfire Gatherings.

Those who volunteered to participate in the Star Search were expected to “serve as documentarians and citizen journalists, taking notes (in any format desired) on the sessions and events that they attend during the conference. The shared spaces where notes were captured was available to conference attendees to see and contribute”. The findings were to be presented during the Closing Ceremony on Friday, April 20. Virtual attendance did not allow for active participation in such search, therefore I can only imagine how exciting this experience was.

Swap-and-Meet. In this term borrowed from the scouts’, both words “meet” and “swap” are important. You meet someone, you talk and exchange little gifts or gadgets, which are the type of currency in this barter. The reason the organizers of OLC adopted this concept was “to encourage people to make contacts, to show appreciation or just give anyone a little gift”. Participants could have prepared the swaps before the conference – at home or in the makerspace they belong to – but the organizers also provided stands with materials for those willing to do something on the spot. Some ideas about what such swaps could look like can be found on Twitter using the #OLC-swapmeet hashtag.

While those two types of engagement were inaccessible to virtual participants, some Campfire Gatherings have been recorded and made available via the OLC Virtual Hub. The idea behind those meetings was the same as with the other forms of activity during the OLC Innovate – just give the participants another occasion to share common interests and experience – but in an informal context. To initiate the conversations some

keynote speakers were invited and asked to present (in any form) during the 5-minute time slot some inspiring or thought-provoking ideas based on their teaching or learning experience. Sometimes the title of the presentation did not reveal the real subject, as was the case with the following two: *On being awake* (delivered by Shel Kimen) and *Pathways and possibilities* (presented by Melody Buckner). The first speaker pointed out two issues – risk and failure – and asked the audience to choose whether they preferred listening or watching. As the last was chosen, she started to dance around the “campfire” and invited others to join her. For a few minutes there was a common dance and joy. In this unconventional way Shel presented risk, and at the end of the dance she confessed that she was terrified. The presentation was well received and followed by applause.

Melody’s talk about educational aspects of losing one’s life in a virtual game was similarly unusual and surprising. She recalled the explanation her teenage son gave her when she was frustrated by such a loss: “Why are you angry? You have just learned something new, and in the next play you will act differently.”

What I liked and what was new to me

Generally, I am not a real fan of virtual attendance at a conference. Although it does have some obvious advantages, the main drawback in my opinion is the limited contact with other participants and no possibility to immerse yourself in the atmosphere of the

gathering. However, in the case of OLC Innovate 2018 its organizers put in a lot of effort to diminish those hurdles, not only by streaming chosen sessions but mainly by creating so many versatile possibilities for immersion in the event and by engaging people in sharing their experience.

As a virtual participant I really appreciated the possibility of listening to live talks, being part of OLC Live, and the many other forms of reporting what was going on in Nashville during those days. I was really impressed by the fact that there were so many informal occasions to “meet” and to listen to the presenters and other people actively involved in the conference. However, I could not experience the real atmosphere of that great gathering and I really missed it. The main reason for attending a conference is meeting others and finding what we have in common, or sharing our passions and interests. And although the organizers provided various opportunities to connect via social media channels, it is not the same. But when you watch a live informal conversation with the keynote speaker or the yoga instructor or the program co-chair, you can feel a bit like “being there”. Thanks for all those OLC Live talks – that was a great idea.

And finally, one other factor has to be mentioned: if a person does not attend the conference on site but gets access to the recordings, it is highly likely that they will return to them and learn more by listening at their own pace, as I did. I have learned a lot by watching OLC Live Virtual Hub and Zoom Rooms.

Maria Zając has a Ph.D. in computer science. She worked many years as the researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Computer Science of the Pedagogical University of Cracow. In 2016 she took over the responsibility for the academic journal “e-mentor” published by the Warsaw School of Economics. Her research interests include but are not limited to personalization of teaching and learning, online education as well as technology-enhanced learning. She is the author of numerous scientific papers and the editor of 15 books related to the use of modern technologies in contemporary education.

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