

The predictive education bazaar that we know as SXSWedu was held this year in Austin, Texas from March 7-10. The SXSWedu® Conference & Festival is a part of the SouthbySouthwest family of conferences, fostering “innovation in learning by hosting a diverse and energetic community of stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds in education.” Over 6,000 international attendees, exhibitors, thought leaders, and other innovators in the education space gathered to get a glimpse of the future of innovation in schooling. And, this year, there was no doubt at SXSWedu that virtual reality was making its presence known in a big way. Virtual reality was virtually—everywhere. You could see its *inescapable* footprint in the concurrent sessions, the workshops, and in hands-on playgrounds. The diversity of approaches and angles was mind-boggling:

- Mike Cuales and Bethanne Tobey of North Carolina State University gave a talk about the use of 360 spherical video as a teaching tool at their university.
- Ilan Bren Yakov of MidCET demonstrated the empathy-creating potential of virtual reality by placing your own head/vision in the body of a dog, chasing cats and living a dog’s life in general.
- Carlos Castaneda of the University of Chihuahua (MX) demonstrated virtual reality combined with gesture control (using a jerry-rigged Leap motion controller creatively mounted on VR headgear).
- Renee Hobbs, from the University of Rhode Island demonstrated the Google Cardboard phenomenon to delighted crowds.
- In their presentation, “Virtual Exchange Meets Virtual Reality”, Grace Lau and Hanna Weitzer of the Global Nomads Group introduced their innovative project combining virtual reality with distance learning, called “Reimagine: Syria”. In this project, students from Los Angeles were dropped into a virtual reality recreation to understand the realities of the Syrian Crisis, and then later, were connected with actual refugee youth in Amman, Jordan in a live skyped session.
- Jennifer Holland, Product Manager for Google Expeditions and Benjamin Scrom, also a Project Manager from Google conducted a two-hour workshop entitled “Explore Your Worlds with Google Expeditions”, a designed to take students “places a school bus can’t go”. The session was filled with tips on how to incorporate Google Cardboard in the classroom as well as lessons learned from teachers using Google’s adaptation of VR across the globe.
- Dr. Jennifer Simonson and Len Scrogan joined forces to provide a more medical perspective about the intersection of virtual reality, reading, learning, and healthy vision for children. (Watch for a deep-dive article on this topic next month.)
- Emory Craig, the Director of eLEarning at the College of New Rochelle and Maya Georgieva, Co-Founder, Digital Bodies (see their interesting web site) conducted a two-hour workshop, “Learning through Virtual Reality experiences.” This workshop offered a history and overview of virtual reality, exposing attendees to a dozen different viewing devices, while raising fundamental questions about future media, storytelling, and narrative using this new medium.

One of the most interesting tabletop activities involved how to design meaningful learning activities that leverage the strengths of virtual reality as a teaching medium. Both of these presenters represent a group called Digital Bodies. Digital bodies also did a nice summary of VR activity at the SXSW innovation conference that followed the week after the SXSWedu educational showcase.

- Lizzie Edwards, Education Manager for the Samsung Digital Learning Programme (Samsung Digital Discovery Centre at the British Museum) led a session entitled “Virtual Reality at the British Museum”, describing the museum’s effort to host a “virtual reality” weekend. During the weekend, families were able to explore the Museum’s first virtual reality environment—a bronze Age round house—set within a realistic landscape, and showcasing 3D scans of real objects from this period in history.
- In the playgrounds area, the Digital Media Academy demonstrated how they help students learn to *create virtual reality environments* through their community-based programs.
- Also in the playgrounds area, a college demonstrated how they use virtual reality as a recruiting tool to attract new students to their campus by featuring innovative virtual reality walkthroughs of their innovative learning spaces. Students can experience the look and feel of the campus before having to commit to a college site visit.

From a marketer’s perspective, this was a dream-come-true conference for promoting the potential of virtual reality in the education space. I was most delighted by the efforts in two of the workshops to define or characterize what makes for effective virtual reality in educational settings. And remember, this was just the SXSWedu component of this weeks-long conference. If you would like to see the business-side, innovation-side perspective of the larger SXSW conference a week later, here is a recap of the many VR presentations at THAT event. It’s worth a look!

In my next installment, however, I am going to flip the coin and tell the other part of the story. The dirty, grimy, unspoken part. You don’t want to miss it. Stay tuned. –Len Scrogan

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