

Reflections from the South by Southwest Education Conference (SxSW Edu)

Career Development

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SxSW Education was a different conference for me because it was not all about technology. This was a prime reason I chose the conference. I was looking for trends inside and outside education.

Many of the sessions I attended had an underlying message of social equity and fairness in schools. Much discussion was about hidden, and unintentional inequities in policies and rules. Interestingly, these discussions meshed very closely with the discussions and premise of the Restorative Practices, or Restorative Justice, training sponsored by Homer Flex that I had previously attended. In fact, as some schools related their guiding principles, “restorative practices” could be seen as part of their charter.

The social/emotional aspect of education has been moving to the front of my educational thoughts. Many of the students coming to Connections through the year report reasons that would fall into the social/emotional category. Many students/parents report anxiety as the primary reason for leaving traditional school. Many use the term bullying. We also see students who have been disciplined at the school. Often, we see students after they have been suspended, after multiple suspensions, and during or after long-term and in some cases multiple long-term suspensions. Connections offers the least support to these students who are the neediest among us.

Somewhat related to equity were presentations regarding how we counsel students toward further education and possible career paths. In a session titled, The Need for Students to “Dream Differently” called for conversations about student loans, the financial value of different degrees, and the value of dual credit, internships and other programs. The basic message was that dreams are fine, but we get paid for our skills, not our dreams.

On the educational technology trends at the conference, virtual reality seemed to be one of the big pushes. Multiple VR vendors were in attendance. There was even an interesting discussion about the ethics of VR in schools. I see potential for VR to help make immersive experiences available to students around the district. Potential applications include incorporating VR labs in science classes (especially online classes) and VR experiences with accompanying lessons for home schooled students.

Coding continues to be a key edtech trend. Multiple vendors were exhibiting their solutions for teaching coding. Many of these products are aimed at introducing coding, and computational thinking, at elementary grade levels. Products ranged from programmable robots, to kits with project cards that led to young learners creating apps (games) that run on students’ devices.

These, and many more topics were experienced at the SxSW Edu conference. The conference was especially valuable because of a large focus on the human, relationship-based side of education. Technology was ever present, but it was clear that technology was not the focus. I will probably not return to this conference next year. However, I could see myself going to it again in the next few years.



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