September 2024

DigiEduHack Webinar #4: Preparing for Impact: Coaching DigiEduHackers for Success (19/09/2024)

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Date: September 19, 2024
Time: 17:00-18:00 CET

Overview:
This webinar focused on strategies for preparing hackathon participants to achieve impactful outcomes. Emphasising the value of the learning journey, speakers shared insights on effective teamwork, problem-solving, and pitching strategies. The session explored technological tools for hackathons and how to create engaging, solution-driven pitches.

Onsite Invited Speakers:

- Bart Verswijvel (Belgium): Senior Pedagogical Adviser, involved in digital education through European Schoolnet and hackathon projects; National Ambassador for DigiEduHack.
- Katerina Zourou (Greece): Digital education expert and CEO of Web2Learn; National Ambassador for DigiEduHack.

Online Invited Speakers:

- Juhani Koivuviita (Finland): Co-founder and CEO of Educator, focused on innovation in education and hackathon organising.
- Victoria Belous (Moldova): Managing Director, National Center for Digital Innovations in Education.

Webinar Host:

- Mart Soonik (Estonia): Communication Manager and Lecturer of MSMedia

Highlights of the interview

What is the purpose of a hackathon?

Bart Verswijvel opened by framing hackathons as more than just events aimed at creating a finished product. He likened them to a pilgrimage, where the journey and the skills developed along the way are often more important than reaching the destination. He emphasised that hackathons build soft skills such as teamwork, resilience, and creativity, which are as valuable as the final outcomes. The process allows participants to meet new people, leave their comfort zones, and build competencies they might not have expected.

Katerina Zourou echoed these sentiments, explaining that hackathons are platforms for collaborative learning, where technology and ideas can be explored freely. She emphasised that it is the learning and creative process that truly matters, not whether participants produce a polished product. Hackathons offer a chance to bring diverse perspectives together to shape and refine concepts, helping participants grow both personally and professionally.

How do you prepare for a hackathon?

Victoria Belous discussed the importance of thorough logistical planning. She suggested that teams should choose the right digital tools, such as Miro for visual brainstorming and Trello for project management, ensuring that the hackathon runs smoothly. However, she also cautioned against over-reliance on digital tools during presentations, emphasising the need for clarity and strong content over flashy visuals. She shared her experience with organising hackathons, noting how careful pre-event organization ensured teams could work effectively, even under time pressure.

Juhani Koivuviita added that it is crucial to familiarise participants with these tools beforehand to reduce confusion during the event. He recommended tools like Google Suite for seamless sharing and collaboration, and Kialo Edu for structured argumentation and brainstorming. Juhani also emphasised the importance of organizsng participants into well-prepared teams and ensuring a common understanding of both the technological platforms and the hackathon goals.

What makes an effective pitch?

Juhani Koivuviita offered his "three S" as a simple framework for effective pitching: Smile, Slow down, and Silence. He explained that smiling helps establish relationship with the audience, slowing down ensures clarity, and strategic pauses allow key points to resonate. He urged participants to rehearse their

pitches thoroughly, recommending at least 20 practice rounds to build confidence and ensure smooth delivery.

Victoria Belous agreed, adding that the most successful pitches are those that are concise, solution-focused, and interactive. She advised participants to focus on clearly presenting their ideas rather than overwhelming the audience with excessive visuals or technical details. Engaging directly with the jury and responding confidently to questions can make a big difference, she said. She also shared a story of two competing teams that, despite the pressure of competition, collaborated and supported each other during the pitch process, which impressed the jury.

How should teams handle unexpected challenges?

Katerina Zourou highlighted that flexibility and resilience are critical when unexpected issues arise during a hackathon. She compared organising and participating in hackathons to hosting a party—you can plan extensively, but there will always be surprises. Learning how to adapt to these surprises, whether technical glitches or team conflicts, is a key part of the hackathon experience. She emphasised that overcoming these challenges can result in some of the most valuable lessons.

Victoria Belous added her own experience with a situation where two participants wanted to work in multiple teams. While initially challenging, it led to an interesting dynamic where the teams collaborated and engaged in a friendly competition, ultimately benefiting both groups. This, she said, was an example of how unforeseen circumstances can become opportunities for creativity and collaboration.

What should happen after the hackathon?

Bart Verswijvel stressed that a hackathon should not be seen as a one-off event. To ensure lasting impact, there needs to be a strong post-event strategy. He suggested organising follow-up activities such as workshops, mentorship programs, or collaboration with sponsors to help participants continue refining their ideas. This kind of engagement keeps the momentum going and allows participants to develop their skills and solutions further.

Juhani Koivuviita supported this by recommending partnerships with accelerator or incubator programmes that can help participants turn their hackathon projects into viable solutions. He noted that forming connections with local or regional innovation hubs can provide teams with the resources they need to continue developing their ideas. By maintaining these relationships and building on the ideas developed during the hackathon, participants can create sustainable, long-term impacts from their initial work.

Funded by
the European Union