



April 2024

DigiEduHack Webinar #1: The DigiEduHack Experience: Choosing the Right Format (25/04/2024)



The "DigiEduHack Experience: Choosing the Right Format" webinar explores digital education hackathons, highlighting the importance of collaboration, inclusivity, and adaptability in creating meaningful learning experiences. Emphasizing the value of diverse perspectives and cross-cultural collaboration, the webinar delves into practical strategies for maximizing accessibility and engagement, both online and in hybrid formats. Key themes such as mentorship, facilitation, and community building emerge as essential elements in fostering innovation and resilience. Through anecdotes and reflections, the webinar captures the spirit of hackathons as transformative events that not only spur technological solutions but also forge lasting connections and personal growth among participants.

- Onsite Invited Speakers: **Tomi Kauppinen**, head of Aalto Online Learning at Aalto University, Finland; and **Janika Leoste**, researcher at Tallinn University, Estonia.
- Online Invited Speakers: **Rasul Mahammadaliyev**, hackathon host and software engineering student at Azerbaijan State University of Economics, Azerbaijan; and **Stefania Oikonomou**, political scientist at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.
- Webinar Host: **Mart Soonik**, DigiEduHack webinar host.



Highlights of the interview

In digital education, we find ourselves as pioneers within a dynamic space where interconnected learners actively transform the online learning landscape. What significance does this hold for us?

Tomi Kauppinen: Individually and collectively, it signifies an opportunity to collaborate with exceptional mentors and participants worldwide, uniting to address the challenges at hand. It's fascinating to see participants learning, working in teams, ideating, designing, prototyping, and pitching, culminating in tangible outcomes that reflect their dedication and innovation.

What is the key to full participation?

Janika Leoste: When engaging with hackathons, various levels of participation emerge. Initially, individuals may hack alone at home without the involvement of colleagues. The next tier involves gathering at universities, kindergartens, or within companies to collaborate. Progressing further, collective hacking occurs at the national level, followed by regional, European, and ultimately global levels. However, education hackathons present unique challenges due to the close intertwining of education with culture and background. Implementing solutions developed in one location, such as Finland or Estonia, may not seamlessly translate to other regions like Italy due to cultural differences. Therefore, adaptation is necessary, highlighting the need for education initiatives spanning Europe. Through such initiatives, participants can compare solutions and identify those suitable for broader European contexts. The approach to education hackathons is best initiated locally with bottom-up participation before scaling upwards. This contrasts with a top-down approach that imposes uniform methods, which is often ineffective.

These people are from different time zones and with different backgrounds. How do you manage it during the hackathon?

Janika Leoste: That's precisely why we encourage people across Europe and worldwide to engage with their local hackathons while also facilitating communication about global events. This is why a dedicated week is set aside for the entire world, allowing for shared learning experiences despite potential time differences and format variations. The key is to collaborate in preparation, both for hosts and participants, recognizing that while some hackathons retain competitive elements, competition can spur quality and innovation.

Tomi Kauppinen: Hackathons offer unique benefits not always found in maker spaces or individual design endeavors. They introduce time and social pressures, fostering a sense of urgency and collaboration. For instance, at a university with multiple locations globally, teams work within a set timeframe to understand and address a problem locally before passing it on to teams in different time zones.

How could technology help us with maximizing this?

Janika Leoste: Accessibility is quite simple. Nowadays, we often consider transitioning everything online, but a recent conversation highlighted the human aspect. When faced with time pressure and difficult problems to solve, human interaction becomes essential. Demonstrating solutions together using body language and providing support, like bringing coffee or soft drinks, enhances collaboration. Thus, to maximize accessibility, we must consider both technology and human interaction.

Tomi Kauppinen: Last year, we organized a hybrid hackathon combining online and onsite participation. Despite the advantages of technology, integrating both formats presented challenges. For instance, online participants sometimes desired onsite mentors, necessitating a search around the university. This highlights the misconception that online hackathons are cheaper; in reality, they require high-level technology and training, such as coaching on camera presence.

Janika Leoste: To foster connection before challenges begin, we provide learning opportunities through podcasts and short videos, contextualizing the event. However, communication during onsite events posed challenges as urgent messages were sometimes missed due to reliance on email. Lessons learned include the importance of checkpoints during physical hackathons to ensure effective communication. Considering various scenarios, such as fluctuating participant numbers and accommodating diverse audiences like students with children, ensures equal opportunities for all participants regardless of the format.

Tomi Kauppinen: You also need to consider the nature of the hackathon, and that's why hackathons still involve competitions. You have to be brave and acknowledge that it might not be the most comfortable situation. You might have to endure some discomfort. Or perhaps you won't get 9 hours of sleep, and maybe you won't only have the healthiest food because you need some raw energy from sugar or something like that.

What if some people don't find a team to work with?

Tomi Kauppinen: It's crucial to bring people together, introduce them to each other, and let them voice their ideas at the parties. This is how they can start forming connections and joining teams. Engaging everyone and allowing each person to introduce themselves, share where they're from, and discuss their passions helps establish connections as they listen and observe each other. We've employed several successful strategies, such as using stickers for participants to indicate their interests and potential solution areas.

How can technology help us gather people together? Or does it not assist in bringing people together?

Stefania Oikonomou: Since the onset of COVID-19, people have become more accustomed to communicating online. Initially, it was challenging to understand and become familiar with the technology, but today, more people are eager to connect fully through technology. If used correctly, technology can yield good results and meaningful achievements.

Rasul Mahammadaliyev: It's important to ensure that online participants in hybrid events feel equally engaged and welcome as physical participants. We should avoid making them feel like second-tier participants. Leveraging technology to provide services like language interpretation, real-time captioning, and accessible communication channels creates a welcoming environment for all and maximizes accessibility.

What are some other possible tips and tricks for hybrid sessions?

Rasul Mahammadaliyev: Hybrid formats offer opportunities to create synergistic engagement experiences that cater to the diverse needs of both online and in-person participants. For example, hybrid hackathons can feature teams comprising both online and in-person members, fostering cross-cultural collaborations and knowledge exchange. Additionally, organizing synchronized activities such as ideation sessions, team meetings, and networking events ensures that all participants feel valued and engaged irrespective of their physical location.

Stefania Oikonomou: Mentors and facilitators play a fundamental role in a successful challenge. Selecting mentors closely connected to the objective and topic of your challenge is crucial. Facilitators need to create a safe and welcoming environment for all participants, especially those joining a hackathon for the first time. They need to understand the context better and collaborate with more experienced peers to ensure harmonious participation and experience levels.

How do you ensure effective communication and participation?

Janika Leoste: Simplifying the process of hosting a hackathon, anyone can be a host. The host is responsible for creating the agenda and inviting mentors with specific knowledge as well as participants. Becoming a host may seem daunting at first, as one might feel they lack expertise in certain subjects. However, hosts do not need to be subject matter experts; they simply need to be community experts who can create a welcoming environment. Hosting a hackathon is akin to hosting a party – it requires good music, a theme, and good people. Challenges and surprises are inevitable, but they provide opportunities for learning and resilience building. Stepping out of one's comfort zone is essential for growth and development.

Stefania Oikonomou: For our online hackathon, coffee and tea moments during the afternoon sessions foster community engagement, making people feel at home and comfortable. This comfort is crucial for innovation, as one cannot innovate under pressure and stress.

Rasul Mahammadaliyev: By embracing diverse perspectives and accommodating various needs, schedules, and locations, we can ensure that every individual has the opportunity to participate fully in the hackathon experience. Using virtual collaboration tools and gamification elements like leaderboards and brainstorming pads can enhance engagement and accessibility.

Janika Leoste: Language plays a crucial role in ensuring inclusivity. During our event, we had two hosts, one providing translations into Estonian and the other conducting discussions in English for international participants. This approach ensured effective communication and inclusivity.

Tomi Kauppinen: Videos are a powerful tool to capture and share the stories of the hackathon experience. They condense a 24-hour story into a few minutes, evoking emotions and providing a lasting record of the event. These videos also serve as a motivational tool, reminding participants and hosts of the impact and success of the event.

What advice do you have for those who want to organize similar events on a low budget?

Tomi Kauppinen: The picnic metaphor is apt. What if people from different cultures bring their own food and drinks to share at a common table? It's not expensive because everyone contributes, and you get to learn from others. Additionally, people want to participate in these challenges, to be part of the story. So as a host, don't be too afraid of organizing the party. Even if technical glitches occur, the participants are there for the experience and connection.

Stefania Oikonomou: In my case, the hackathon was a touching experience due to its connection with Ukrainian cultural heritage. Despite technical challenges, such as a bombing alarm during a session, the event was significant and impactful. It's experiences like these that highlight the importance of flexibility and resilience.

Rasul Mahammadaliyev: Despite technical issues, such as the unexpected departure of our tech support person, the hackathon was a success due to the community's resilience and positivity. These challenges taught us valuable lessons and helped us create a strong coding community.