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Notes from eLearning Africa 2008

Last week I attended the third annual [eLearning Africa](#) conference in [Accra, Ghana](#). Approximately 1500 delegates from 83 countries, mostly in Africa, gathered to discuss, share and promote various approaches to information and communication technologies (ICT) in education (primary, secondary and tertiary). The conference included researcher and practitioner presentations as well as exhibitions of commercial products that addressed topics such as teacher training, infrastructure, content and open educational resources.

As far as I know, no other conference on the continent gives such an overall sense of what is happening in eLearning in Africa. It was well organised, interesting and an excellent opportunity for networking.

While I've [blogged about some of the actual sessions and projects](#), it is also important to take a step back and consider the conference as a whole, as well as ICT in education in Africa in general.

What was presented at the conference?

- Small, portable computers, e.g. the \$100 laptop and Intel's Classmate PC.
- Low-power computing came up in a few sessions. Electricity remains a major problem in Africa.
- Lots of exhibitors were selling electronic white boards.

What *wasn't* presented at the conference?

- The focus was much more on ICTs — hardware and software — than on content and delivery. Some exhibitors were selling educational content, though.
- Out of the 47 workshops/sessions only two were about Web 2.0. This is very telling, and worrying! (Although in some of the sessions I attended there were certainly Web 2.0-like projects, which just hadn't been labelled as such.)
- There were surprisingly few projects about mobile learning. Africa's most pervasive ICT device is the mobile phone; her Web 2.0 revolution is going to happen through it.
- No open source software (OSS) solutions were exhibited, although a number of projects had been built using OSS (e.g. the [TESSA Open Educational Resources repository](#)).

A few suggestions to make the conference more interesting:

- Bring content and delivery to the fore (up there with hardware and software).
- Get more teachers to attend (their voices were sometimes missing).
- The huge disparities in the level of experience, knowledge and exposure of those attending made it difficult to pitch sessions at an appropriate level for maximum impact or interaction. For example, in the Web 2.0 session some people were there because they'd heard of this new thing and wanted to know

more, while others were rolling out cutting-edge user-generated content projects. To address this, perhaps sessions could be targeted at different experience levels, e.g. What is web 2.0?, Advanced web 2.0 projects, etc.

Lastly (and this is a point that I'm increasingly becoming aware of on a local level), there is no "Africa." The continent is vast and wildly varied. We need an intelligent way to stratify education and technology access across the continent. Some schools have broadband and are doing amazing work, whereas one teacher training college has one (unconnected) computer for 500 students. These people clearly do not have similar ICT experiences, even though they both come from Africa.

What was clear from the conference was that there are as many interesting and innovative projects in Africa as from the rest of the world. eLearning Africa is a great way to realise that and I will certainly try to attend next year's conference.