More than 6,000 people descended on Austin, Texas, this past March 3-6 for what has become an increasingly popular conference for educators nationwide. Founded in 2011, SXSWedu brings together educators, administrators, policy makers, experts, and businesses to discuss and highlight emerging and current trends in K-12 education.

New technologies and methods of using technology in the classroom dominated many sessions at SXSWedu. Kicking the conference off, Amplify released a new Android tablet by Intel Education aimed at public schools, with updates since its first release in 2013. The new version is more rugged to withstand the rigors of the classroom. The tablet also has an open platform that teachers can control, preloaded curriculum that aligns with the common core (see this SAIS article from March of 2013 on Common Core), and access to a gallery of learning games. The tablet has been piloted in various school districts since the fall, and initial feedback has been positive. It will be available to schools starting in the 2014-2015 school year.

Game-based learning was also a popular topic with companies such as BrainPop and GameSalad touting their various products and platforms designed to engage students and make learning fun. The popular game Minecraft has gained recent attention as a way to teach students creativity, engineering, design, and teamwork. At BrainPop’s GameUp platform, a basketball game teaches math principles, and a spaceman game teaches coding to children as young as kindergarteners. In “Games, Critical Thinking, and Assessment,” Celia Alicata from Classroom Inc., and previously with Teach for America, and David Conover, a high school teacher of video game design, discussed how games promote critical thinking and are a natural fit for students, many who already spend time outside the classroom playing games. Experts like Julie Evans of Project Tomorrow, says games promote a natural learning process: try, fail, try again, persevere, and ultimately, succeed. Meanwhile more and more games have added a key component, real-time assessments, which allow teachers to understand students’ decision-making process while they work. Equipped with the data, teachers can identify acquired skills, and spot problem areas that need to be addressed or revisited.

In “Learning with Digital and Participatory Maps,” Giuliana Cucinelli, a doctoral student in comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, joined other experts in discussing the use of Google maps or other map tools in the classroom. Students can use digital maps as a complement when discussing history or literature. They flex their math skills by measuring distances,
create their own maps to accompany class projects, collaborate with peers on the same map, and use “placemarks” on their map to embed text, pictures, or video. And in February Google launched a platform in conjunction with the National Geographic Society, which includes more than 500 historical maps that can be used to teach history subjects such as the Civil War, discuss social issues such as health care expenditures or poverty, or cover science topics such as climate or the migration patterns of animals.

Representatives from Edutopia, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and EdReach discussed a shift in how education news is covered and published. Daniel Rezac, co-founder and editor-in-chief of EdReach said a simple Google search reveals the large number of negative stories published about schools and educators by the media. However, social media and the Internet allow teachers, students, and the community to share and contribute their own positive stories on education. Plus, more companies are looking to provide communities where educators can collaborate or share content. On EdReach users can contribute and share podcasts on everything from new technologies to education policy to classroom practices. Another resource, PBS NewsHour Extra provides middle and high school teachers and students with a wealth of content on social studies, science, and language arts curriculum. The site also provides a platform where students can contribute content. PBS has developed an online community aimed at training the next generation of journalists. The website connects students with mentors in public broadcasting, and provides curriculum and the tools and space for students to develop their own news reports. Leah Clapman, managing editor of NewsHour, said these types of tools are empowering and will continue to empower students, teachers, and their communities.

Amidst a wealth of tech-focused sessions, a handful touched on the state of the liberal arts. The liberal arts and the humanities have been the focus of ongoing criticism due to the high demand for STEM or STEAM skills, the tough job market, and the high cost of higher education. Catherine Crago is the founder of Diversity Interactive, a company that provides corporations with strategic planning based on global trends, population growth, and demographic changes. She joined other experts in a session “The Liberal Arts Matter in a STEM World.” Crago said the humanities teach invaluable people skills, as well as history and context, competencies required of anyone looking to lead others or solve the problems of the coming age. Also, Clay Spinuzzi, a rhetoric and writing professor at The University of Texas at Austin, said the liberal arts are all about people and how we interact and work as individuals, but also in groups and organizations. The art of rhetoric and persuasion is a complicated process of considering stakeholders, what makes them tick, and how we can meet their needs to create a solution that works for everyone. “When we think about how communications in a business works, we might think of memos or spreadsheets, but we also must
consider rhetoric and the role of persuasion: from the sales person making their commission, to the CEO gaining the support of its board on a project,” he said.

While the conference was indeed a melee of various trends in education, one criticism was the increasingly commercial nature of the event. Developers and ed tech entrepreneurs comprised a greater presence than in years past, irking some educators interested in discussing process and “best practice or use” and not being sold another product. One speaker, Mark Edward, a superintendent in Mooresville, NC, who is considered a pioneer of 1:1 computing in public schools, made the interesting comment that tech companies should be paying schools to test their products, which in turn builds their brand, not the other way around. Certainly though, SXSWedu is ground zero for new trends in ed tech and will continue to be a mecca for educators hungry for what’s next.

Did you attend SXSWedu? Let us know!
Email sarah@sais.org to share your experiences.