

# STORYTELLING WITH DATA

21th of October 2021, Stimulearning organizes the tenth edition of the L&D Talks. This event is a highlight for L&D in Belgium, as for once top speakers come to us rather than the opposite. One of the international speakers is Zsolt Olah, Learning Consultant from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

When I interviewed Zsolt, March 27th, 2020, Belgium and the Netherlands were in the midst of a semi-lock-down because of COVID-19, in May it was decided to postpone the event to 2021. Because of my working relationship with Kristoff Vandermeersch, we work together on the “Tendensen in Leren” survey in Belgium and the Netherlands, I offered my assistance to him. Out of the list of speakers Kristoff gave me, I selected Zsolt Olah. Digital Problem Solver @Kineo for the WORL&D | Data | Creative Tech | Author | Speaker | Doer | Games & Gamification. He is also author of the January, 2020 issue of TD@Work Game Thinking: from Content to Actions.

Zsolt, born in Hungary, went at the age of 29 to the United States of America, he now lives in Philadelphia. He is a creative learning consultant at Kineo with over 15 years of experience in the learning and development space. His passion is to combine innovative learning and performance technology with human-centred design goes back to his thesis project, where he built an artificial neural-network using machine learning. He is a frequent speaker at learning conferences on the subject of engagement, game thinking for L&D, and storytelling with data. He is also the author of the book Engage the WORL&D!, exploring six essential traits of instructional design through adventures in an imaginary WORL&D.



Previously, Zsolt led an instructional design team, and for nine years, he worked as a senior program manager at Comcast, designing and building learning and performance solutions with business impact.

**We cannot pass by this, and hopefully when the L&D Talks in October are held it's over, or they've found a solution, what do you think is our biggest learning out of this pandemic?**

Zsolt thinks that it is not the data that will be remembered. A lot of data will be gathered out of this pandemic, and of course will serve as input for learning. He says that the stories will be much more important. Like that nurse who volunteered on her day off to help her colleagues with testing more people. Or that doctor that held the hand of one of the patients.

**Reason why I picked you for this interview, was also your profile on LinkedIn: “Building impact, not courses! Leading teams to move from focusing on content to action, from learning to performance, from courses to impact. Engage the WORL&D!” I see so many L&D people struggle with this. What are the obstacles holding people back from doing what they're supposed to?**

You mean why are they not moving like others do? There's a complexity around this f.e. what happened to taxi drivers. For a long time, here in Philadelphia, getting a taxi was a pain. They are a pain, don't show up, or show up but with a dirty car, drivers don't talk to you, you have to pay cash, painful experiences over all. Until Uber and Lyft showed up the whole ride was a mystery. The cab industry was tweaking it “inside the box” but were not getting out of their comfort zone to make real impact. Uber and Lyft changed the taxi industry and still they didn't want to make a change. That is what I think L&D is looking at today. We keep hearing about showing the value to the business, but we don't even have simple data literacy to back up our claims. What is measured gets done, and that is often how many times people took a course, number of hours of training, which nobody really cares about besides learning professionals. We often taught the business to come to us for training. A 15 minutes e-learning course to pass the score to the LMS. This order-taker mentality is exhausting. Some through leaders advocate for a complete destruction and different way of thinking, others want us to take it slower. Either case, it starts with asking the right questions. Building trust by speaking the language of information while being creative with solutions won't come overnight. But we need to change the current model because by the time the business come to us there is no time, no resources, and no money to be creative.

**You have a couple of favourite questions to answer: “How to maximize impact without blowing the training budget?” is one, can you tell me more?**

Because it is not always about lack of money. It comes down to focusing on impact instead of on content. Focus on the impact and on the busi-

ness and performance goals along with the desired behavior. At Kineo, we call this Designing for Results. You don't need more money persé. What you need is distributing the resources the most impactful way that you can change behaviour that impacts the business goal itself. Some of the solutions will be training, but it might be motivational issues, lack of knowledge or skill. Rearrange and restructure the resource that you have and map it to the right actions. Finding out the barriers, which is what's holding people back from doing the right thing. Not everything needs to be in a course. It can be a skill that they need to practise in a safe environment, faulty systems, wrongly processed applications that aren't working. Sometimes a checklist makes miracles. The value of this analysis upfront is the ability to bring stakeholders in one room and talk through these barriers from different angles. Half of the problems will be solved in that room just because different departments hardly never talk to each other. You don't need to spend more money, you need to spend it wisely.

**I read somewhere "If we torture data long enough, it will confess!" Is that true you think? Why did you choose storytelling for data?**

I like to think of data as captured moments of time describing human activities. Twenty years ago I built machine learning from scratch. Most of us within L&D are not going to do that. We don't need to be data scientists. But we do need to understand data as that there are hidden stories behind each spreadsheet and numbers. It is all about people, so it's not just throwing equations on them and come up with a number and a 3D pie chart. It's often about how the data was collected, why it was collected, what was the story behind it. The story is there, our goal is the basic data literacy to be able to tell stories while working with those who are data experts. Focus on the human side and validate the findings. We also need to be able visualise data. When interpret results, we give meaning to data. You can do harm if your interpretation isn't correct. In your organization, are you speaking the same language? We just did a webinar on data literacy to discuss the difference between data, information, knowledge, insights, etc. For example, without context, data is barely information; without meaning information may not be useful knowledge.

**You talk about the younger generation, how do they learn differently?**

Couple of things; the notion is that they learn differently than we used to is debunked. There's a lot of research around the actual learning process. The way we learn, what's happening in their brain isn't really different. And there's this myth about "digital natives." They might know how to fast finger and text super fast and use Instagram, TikTok etc., but beyond that, if you take them to a spreadsheet, or ask them to do some styling in a Word document, they might be clueless. It's not about generations, it's all about individuals and their experiences, their interests, but most of all their motivation to learn. One of the assumptions is, because there are age differences, you don't need to teach people technology, or talk about how they learn best. We still need to. People may have preferences, but it doesn't mean that's the most effective way to learn. Netflix of learning, for example! Entertainment is all about consumption and easy access to the next show. But that's not learning! Not recall or application.



Reading about active listening skills or watching a video, for example, that's not enough. You also need to practise these skills. Our job is to provide them exercises where they can practise on their listening skills and provide feedback so they can grow their skills. Motivation is key. If you can convince them that the skill is applicable generally, they will do the rest. Active listening can be used in an interview, negotiations, salary discussion with your boss.

Another myth about the young generations is the goldfish attention span. It is, again, debunked. They can watch movies for hours. The problem is not the attention span but irrelevant, boring, passive learning content.

I love the new generation, their energy and excitement about things; their challenging attitude towards "we've always done it like this." Things change so fast in today's world that we don't have experts anymore sitting on their college degrees.

In the old times you could be an expert in something for ever. But today there is so much complexity going on with interdisciplinary and cross functioning teams that you must be a team player. What's the future? Should you be the mad scientist? Or should you be someone who works very well with others? If I have a very good hammer, I will keep hammering on everything. However, if I can bring people together with lots of different tools we can make something a lot of more useful. If a young person is so ambitious, I think it's better that they learn how to bring people together as a team to work with different tools, instead of hammering the same thing.

One perfect role for a newbie is the permission to ask stupid questions. Experts may not question the job anymore. Fresh eyes and minds can be advocates for the opposing side. They're the ones who can come up with new stories.

**Last question. What do you hope to take home with you to the States?**

Although technology can bring us together online, for me still it is important to meet with people in real life. I'm looking forward to getting together with other speakers, catching up, hear what they are busy with. And then during the conference meeting all the participants and their stories, questions, experiences. That's what I like to take home with me. ■



Interview was held by **Margreet Boeren** | L&D advisor | founder of the Q8 Academy at Kuwait Petroleum North West Europe | Learning Ambassador for Lead Your Future, a platform for young talented females | Ambassador for Develhub and Stimulearning; this cooperation results in a.o. organizing the 'Tendensen in Lereren' survey in Belgium and the Netherlands.