

“Risk-taking only happens when you give students the chance to push ahead”

Interview by [Caroline Smrstik Gentner](#)
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What happens when you bring together high-school students, teachers, and technology entrepreneurs to experiment with new ideas for learning? Christoph Wittmer talks about shaping the future of education with innovation.

Caroline Smrstik Gentner: What inspired you to set up a Digital Learning Lab (DLL) at the Lyceum Alpinum Zuoz, a Swiss international boarding school?

Christoph Wittmer: It's always been a credo of mine that young people must have the opportunity to find out what they're capable of doing, early on. They shouldn't just absorb knowledge and store up their learning until they are finally allowed to do something, to work on real projects. And secondly, I believe a school should not only consist of teachers but needs to include external experts. It's not enough to learn abstractly: we have to bring some of the world into the classroom.

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CSG: You had collaboration partners like [Opendata.ch](#) and [Kickstart Innovation](#) come to Zuoz. What did they do there?

CW: What we did wasn't a “hackathon” in the usual sense of the word. There's not that much raw data available in the educational world; and what is there is highly sensitive. Schools can't just give out students' data. We worked more on ideas and idea development than on pure data hacking.

Our Lab in March 2019 was an experimental space in which the students and teachers could collaborate with various experts – specialists, programmers, and entrepreneurs – and experiment with new ideas in a short time frame. In a day and a half of workshops, we [developed 11 learning ideas](#). And these ideas are developing into projects: “World School” began with a working trip in May to a school in Romania, and “Digital Balance” and “Learning Nomads” are ready to start. I expected that this would be an exciting process and it was much more successful than I thought.

CSG: Your students have been able to broaden their thinking through this process.

CW: I think there's a design flaw in the Swiss education system: the college preparatory high schools do no more than prepare young people to study at a university. There's no learning to take risk or responsibility. Risk-taking only happens when you give students the chance to push ahead with their own projects.

That's why at the end of our Lab it was only the students who presented the projects. They stood on stage and explained how they would want to do it. You give the students so much power that way, because it goes much further than "presenting" on some topic you've put together by googling information. It's a pitch of one's own core idea.

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CSG: With the DLL, you've created a structured process for idea generation. How could this be taken to other schools and put into practice?

CW: The format is relatively easy to copy. Kickstart and Opendata.ch are ready to provide 30 professionals, like external education experts, designers, entrepreneurs, and programmers. You need a space for everyone to come together, 30 students, and a stack of ideas to start "hacking." It's a great system because it implies a new kind of learning and teaching: student leadership, more playful learning, more exploring. These are ideas that everyone talks about, but haven't made it into the school system here yet. At best, schools will have project weeks, something special students and teachers do for a short time, but then it's back to regular teaching.

The Swiss society and its schools are lagging in terms of digitalization. This has to change, because otherwise we'll have created a whole generation that's not fit or capable of working in a different, digital world.

Christoph Wittmer is Head of School at the Lyceum Alpinum Zuoz, a Swiss international boarding school near St. Moritz, Switzerland. He was previously Head of School at the public Cantonal High School Enge in Zurich, and initiated the HSGYM (a network of institutions comprising the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology ETH, the University of Zurich, Zurich Universities of Applied Science and high schools). He is one of the Spotlight Switzerland 2019 award winners.

The **Lyceum Alpinum Zuoz**, founded in 1904, is a Swiss international boarding school near St. Moritz, Switzerland. Students come from over 30 nations, as well as the neighboring towns, to study in the alpine village. The school is home to 200 boarders and 100 day students between the ages of 12 and 18.

A **Digital Learning Lab (DLL)** tries out, tests and develops new or existing solutions to improve learning practices and learning environments with the support of digital technologies and media. The model is based on a unique innovation and sprint design process and practices that rely on testing and validating solutions from prototypes, start-ups, enterprises and open resources. The DLL as practiced at the Lyceum Alpinum in Zuoz provides a methodology with supporting toolbox to identify challenges of learning institutions and environments in enabling unique learning experiences, and supports inclusive commercial and open innovation in development.

The Digital Learning Lab was one of the ten **Spotlight Switzerland** projects presented at the **HundrED Campus Seminar** on 30 October 2019 in Zurich. The prizewinning projects highlight emerging best practices for digital transformation in the schools. The initiative is a collaboration between We Are Play Lab Foundation, Gebert Rűf Stiftung, Jacobs Foundation, Stiftung Mercator Schweiz, Beisheim Stiftung, digitalswitzerland next generation, and the Zurich University of Teacher Education.

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