

# The Emergence of For-Profit E-learning Providers in Asia

By Ross Perkins

*Introducing Dr. Luca Botturi, winner of the 2008 ECT Foundation Robert deKeiffer International Fellowship Award*

If you have not been to Lugano, Switzerland, you need to put it on your “to see” list this moment. Those who have been there will tell you about the beautiful Swiss-Italian town that cascades down hill-sides into a small valley surrounded by a placid lake bordering its south-eastern edge. Standing at the train station above the town, one can see glimpses of the mountains beyond mountains that so define the Alps. I had the opportunity to visit Lugano in April 2008. I went there to meet with Dr. Luca Botturi, whom I had first met in the virtual environment, Second Life, and then face-to-face in 2007 at the AECT conference in Anaheim, CA.

In this article, Dr. Botturi provides many first-person perspectives, gives an overview of his research and the work he does with colleagues in developing countries through the *seed association*, and discusses his role within AECT’s International Division where he serves as membership coordinator. I know Luca to be a devoted husband and father, a generous man, a bright researcher, and a wonderful resource to all members of AECT. I trust that through this interview, readers will also find ways to connect with him on a personal level.

Dr. Botturi, an Italian originally from the suburbs of Milano, works at the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI, also called the University of Lugano) in its New Media in Education Laboratory, or “NewMinE Lab” ([www.newmine.org](http://www.newmine.org)). There, he

is the executive director of the “red-ink” Swiss school on education in the knowledge society, a doctoral-level program. The school’s students are junior researchers in the social sciences. Red-ink has as its goal “understanding the complex issues related to the introduction, management and impact of educational technologies and eLearning in the perspective of the new context of the knowledge society” ([www.red-ink.ch](http://www.red-ink.ch)). It brings together three Swiss institutions of higher education in order to “establish an outstanding multidisciplinary research team at National level, with expected international visibility and impact” (ibid). The school is funded by the Swiss National Research Fund.

Luca states, “yet another slice of my time goes with another lab, the e-learning lab ([www.elearninglab.org](http://www.elearninglab.org)), which is the “field arm” of the NewMinE Lab. There, I manage some e-learning development projects and help run the online learning services for our academic staff.”

Botturi was educated at private Catholic schools in Milano from primary through secondary levels. At age 18, he moved to Lugano, because, as he writes, “it was the only school of communication sciences close to Italy at the time. That proved to be a good choice!” He completed his undergraduate studies with a year in Vienna, Austria, in 2000, where he worked on a research project at the Technical University. He returned to Lugano to get his Ph.D., completed in 2003, which included five months of study at the University of British

Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. He is multi-lingual, as well, as one might imagine. Though Italian is his native tongue, Luca speaks English, Spanish, and German. Currently, some of his work is in francophone countries, so he also trying to learn French.

Asked about his doctoral work, Botturi said that he started to work on adaptive hypermedia for learning, “but soon discovered that there were no standard ways to describe a course, so you could not compare them. Then, using some search engine (I think it was Altavista), I discovered that in the U.S. there was a discipline called Instructional Design. I was not aware of that—teaching and learning in Europe falls almost completely under psychology and not under design. That was my turning point. And I then started to work on a language for visually describing instructional designs, aka an instructional design visual language.”

He states that he went into the field of educational technology because he “was looking for a field that talked about education from a practical point of view. I maintain teaching is an art, not a science, and therefore psychology and sociology can tell a lot, but not *how* to become a good teacher, or how to help teachers. This is what I found in educational technology.” Because of his interest in instructional design, Luca was pointed to AECT by Rick Kenny, his mentor at UBC, Vancouver.



Figure 1: Dr. Luca Botturi (far left) and colleagues explore their new XO laptops.

His philosophy of teaching and learning is straightforward. “As simple as it might be, when I teach I focus on two things: beauty and fun. I think that we learn when we are caught in wonder, and beauty teaches more than anything: an old church, a painting, a piece of good music. Art stretches us beyond our limits. Then I think we learn when we have fun and are relaxed, so I try to choose things that amuse me first—I cannot involve others in things I deem boring! The backbone of this, then, is careful planning with clear goals, otherwise you get a funny and beautiful circus, but no learning.”

“I like design in all senses,” writes Botturi. “I like producing things, objects, situations, events, etc. So my re-

search interest is on design in general, and particularly on those forms of design that involve people, like teaching—where you design for people to learn. I then like games and unconventional instructional methods, such as game-based learning, music-based learning, or digital storytelling.”

Asked about his favorite games, he says, “With my kids we play *Jenga*, and another game I found in a shop in Bern, called *The Tower of Babel*.” But he does not only like playing games and doing research on them, he also enjoys making them.

“I like doing games (not video-games!) for all ages. I like it because it is an activity where I use my hands and can balance the time I spend in

front of the screen. I also like it because playing games is a great way of staying together. One game I like is *TORTA* (“cake” in Italian). It simulates a sort of market where each person has different goals, and proposes trades to other players. It is very easy (I’m a minimalist designer, indeed) so you play with a multi-layer wooden cake and a deck of cards. How did I develop that? By observing how people “assault” the buffet at parties—indeed, that happens more in Mediterranean countries than elsewhere! You can find updates on my game activities at my blog, [bombadil-games.blogspot.com](http://bombadil-games.blogspot.com).

In summer 2008, Botturi was a visiting scholar at SUNY Potsdam.

During that time, he worked with Dr. Tony Betrus and Dr. Edd Schneider, where they “tried to investigate what makes a game engaging for different types of players.” He says the three of them (and others) see this as “the basis of game-based learning, whose power relies on engagement.” The stay in up-state New York was actually Botturi’s second as a visiting scholar abroad. Previously, he spent four months at the Open University of Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain.

Asked about what he feels to be his most important scholarly contributions, Botturi becomes humble. When pressed, he mentions a paper about instructional design models and the “real life” of instructional design projects that came out of his work in Barcelona. It was selected as second-best paper at the conference where it was presented, then invited for a book, and is currently being re-printed again. He emphasizes, though, that he does not necessarily want to be defined by his publications and research, adding, “I tend to be more proud of non-scholarly achievements, from success in a project with new media for children with disabilities, to preparing a good dinner, having fun with my kids or playing good music at a concert.”

In addition to his family, work,

and travels, one passion of Botturi’s is music, as he mentioned above. At the International Dinner and Auction at the AECT Conference in Orlando, Florida in 2008, Botturi teamed up with Dr. Greg Clinton (University of Georgia), to serenade the crowd. Luca played mandolin while Greg played guitar. In an interesting twist, the songs were “auctioned,” and along with the proceeds of other items, the monies benefited the ECT Foundation.

Asked about his history of music, Botturi recalls, “I started playing music when I was 12—none in my family did, except my cousin, and I had my parents buy me a guitar for Christmas. I never had formal musical education, I just played a lot with my friends (and some were musicians, so they taught me), and spent an incredible number of hours playing. I think this is why I never really played videogames or watched TV.”

Among his favorite artists are Bruce Springsteen, Alison Krauss & Union Station, and U2. “And I always enjoy listening to the Blues Brothers,” he admits. The author of this article has met a number of professors of instructional design who are also musicians (too many to mention, actually), and when Botturi was asked if he thinks this field has a special at-

traction for them, he responded, “Musicians, like actors, develop the ability to [develop] a relationship with the audience. This is what also teachers do: you plan, but then that relationship is what makes the difference. Moreover, musicians (differently from actors) are used to using instruments and technologies, and have more formal thought—but that is only speculation. It would make an interesting topic of research.”

In addition to entertaining the audience, the International Division board was also pleased to honor Dr. Botturi with the Educational Communication and Technology (ECT) Foundation 2008 *Robert de Keiffer International Fellowship* award. This award is presented to an individual in recognition of professional leadership in the field of educational communications and technology in a foreign country. Specifically, the honor goes to an individual who, 1) has conducted a major project or been involved in the advancement of educational communications and technology outside of the United States, 2) is recognized as a leader in the field based on his/her teaching, research or service records, and 3) has been active and is instrumental in forging a professional partnership in educational communications and technology between the United States and one or more foreign countries.

Botturi notes that he gave the prize to “seed” (typically spelled in lower case) which has been supporting a project in Croatia. *Seed* is, according to Luca, “a Lugano-based non-profit organization that provides services in communication, education, and digital technologies for other non-profit organizations, both local and in international cooperation projects.” Botturi, along with a colleague, Isabella Rega, started *seed* in 2006. They and four part-time staff provide services for many local and international organizations across Europe and in South America. The URLs for *seed* and its blog are: [www.seedlearn.org](http://www.seedlearn.org) and [blog.seedlearn.org](http://blog.seedlearn.org).

“We are now working in southern Switzerland with social workers and with children with disabilities,”



Figure 2: *Seed* staff at their office in Lugano, Switzerland. *seed*, founded by Botturi and colleague Isabella Rega, works in developing areas to do consulting in educational uses of technology.



Figure 3: Façade of the Università della Svizzera italiana (University of Lugano).

writes Botturi, describing *seed's* current work. “Isabella is in Brazil for a teacher training session for a project where we will use blogs for learning. This summer we will have a project in Croatia on digital storytelling with children. We are also part of three European projects—for them we work in Switzerland, but network with partners from all over Europe.”

When asked about the impact *seed* is having, he writes, “It is too early to say. Impact in our field must be measured in the long term. What I have seen though is that, when we start a project, this often becomes a backbone in the transformation of organizations. In other words, we often start a project as an ‘add-on’ to the organization’s regular business. But then, when managers see the commitment generated and understand the potential of it, they come back and use the project as a way to transforming the whole organization. For example, rethinking internal communication patterns, or clarifying the mission, or re-opening a discussion about teaching and learning in a school. I think this is the actual role of technologies: more than anything else, they provide an opportunity to rethink

what we do.”

On that theme, when asked to reflect on what he envisions as the future of educational technology, Botturi laments that he is unfortunately not a prophet. However, he writes, “I hope, that we all, as a field, are able to help practitioners—teachers, trainers—to do their best and provide new opportunities to all learners. I’m doing my best for it. This can happen through technologies, but also through a better understanding of the learning and teaching practice. I think a necessary step in this to understand the cultural differences in learning. This helps broaden your view and make your designs more effective.” The most important things to be thinking about with regard to technology integration, he writes, are first and foremost, “people, people, people. We do not work with technologies, but with people. We should involve people, care after them, and understand them. Technology follows.” This is indeed the main research tenet of the NewMinE lab in Lugano.

Botturi’s emphasis on the centrality of “people” to the field helps explain his current role within the International Division. As mentioned at

the top of the article, Botturi also has served as the membership coordinator for the division. He states that he has two primary goals. “I think two standard goals for any membership coordinator are maintaining members in the division and acquiring new ones. But I think the way of doing that is creating an environment that can really get useful—in terms of visibility, networking, and new ideas. So I would like the division to become something of which people can say “I enjoy being a member!”

On behalf of Luca, and the current International Division president, Dr. Abbas Johari, I would invite all AECT members reading this article who are not already part of the International Division to join today. Like many of the organizations divisions, it is a great place to connect with colleagues on many levels. Our hope is to attract members who, like Dr. Botturi, bring a richness of experience, depth of scholarship, and compassion for people to the field of instructional technology. We look forward to meeting you in Louisville this year!